

Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time  
February 6, 2011

I find Jesus and Isaiah challenging. Uncomfortably challenging. Both are strong, blunt, uncompromising. Each tells me something I really would rather not hear. Jesus, because he tells me what I should *be* and usually am not. Isaiah, because he tells me what I should *do* and usually don't.

Why did Jesus choose these two metaphors, salt and light? First, salt was a critical necessity for human life, along with water and fire. Salt kept things from spoiling, rotting, corrupting. Salt even purified. That is why, in Old Testament times, salt was used to season every sacrifice. In Catholic liturgical tradition, the baptismal ritual included putting salt on the infant's tongue as a symbol of incorruptibility. Another way in which salt was used was to ratify covenants. As a preservative, salt symbolized the lasting nature of the agreement.

The accompanying image of disciples as light reinforces the message. As impossible as it is for a city set on a mountain to be hidden, and as unthinkable as wasting fuel to light a lamp only to extinguish it immediately, so inconceivable is it that disciples would cease to let their light shine before others. What is the point in getting baptized, joining the Christian community and then become completely invisible to others, especially my neighbors, colleagues or friends?

All well and good. A nice footnote to history. But the Jesus of today's Gospel is not playing historian. He is making an astounding affirmation – first to his followers and then to every disciple since he came down from the Mount of Beatitudes: "You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world." Is the Lord being serious, or is this one of his deliberate exaggerations, like "If you don't hate your father and mother, you cannot be a disciple of mine."

Sorry, friends. No hyperbole here. You *are* the salt of the earth. In the Talmud there is an account of a rabbi who was asked by philosophers in Rome, "If salt becomes tasteless, with what can it be salted?" He responded, "With an after-birth of a mule." The point is that just as it is impossible for a mule to give birth or for salt to become insipid, so disciples cannot cease to be who they are and to season the world with good news.

Not simply apostles like Andrew and Peter, fervent followers like Mary of Nazareth and Mary of Magdala. Not just Francis of Assisi and Francis Xavier. Not just Teresa of Avila, Therese of Lisieux, Teresa of Calcutta. No. If we are ever to move from war to peace, from starvation to sanity, from hating to loving, this earth of ours rests on your shoulders and mine. Not a gentle suggestion. A loud trumpet sound.

Our mission, like salt, is to improve the quality of human living, change what we touch, preserve from devastation this God-shaped, dreadfully scarred earth, this paradox of beauty and the beast. If we disciples turn flat, lifeless, tasteless, some of our sisters and brothers will suffer, spoil, corrupt – will starve for bread or justice or love. And us? Listen to the harsh judgment of Jesus: “You will be worthless, useless, fit for the garbage heap, deserve to be thrown into the street with the rest of the rubbish”.

And you *are* the light of the world. Meaning what? Jesus is insisting that we who have risen with him and live in his presence, we who eat his flesh and drink his blood, have no right to hide our gifts, have no right to clutch them in our hands for ourselves. The gifts we have should stand out, shine out like the new Christ Our Hope signage, should make people pause, to look and listen. Our faith should lend fidelity to the faithless, our hope raise the hopeless from the street, our love assuage the cancer of hate that rages through all too many hearts.

Not to make others like us, admire us, envy us. In Jesus’ words, that those who cross our path may “give praise to our heavenly Father,” so that in God’s human images *God* may be glorified. Here, in four Gospel verses, is what I dare call our Christian mission. Your task, like mine, is to furnish a fresh flavor to the world we walk, to shine like Bethlehem’s star for such as are searching – searching for something, for someone, to make life more human.

Is it all so terribly vague? How do we do this? Isaiah 58 thunders one way. Listen once again to the Old Testament prophet. “To loose the bonds of injustice... to undo the thongs of the yoke... to let the oppressed go free... to break every yoke...” And Isaiah is not finished with us yet: “Is it not to share your bread with the hungry? And bring the homeless poor into your house? When you see the naked, to cover them? Not to hide yourself from your own kin?”

It is then, and only then, that we will truly be the salt of the earth. “Then your light shall break forth like the dawn and your light shall rise in the darkness.” It shouldn’t surprise you. It was in such Isaian syllables that Jesus summed up his own mission in the Nazareth synagogue: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed.”

The most effective servant is the suffering servant, the servant whose experience makes for com-passion, the servant who “suffers with.” It is especially “then” that “you shall call, and the Lord will answer you. You will cry for help, and the Lord will say, ‘Here I am’... Then your light shall rise for you in the darkness and your gloom become for you like the noonday.”

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