

Last weekend, we took a quick look at the first two Beatitudes: “Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” and “blessed are they who mourn for they will be comforted.” In connection with the second one, I referred to a teaching from Pope Benedict XVI that said that when we truly mourn evil in the world, we will act to overcome that evil and bring comfort to those who are suffering from the evil. Maybe some of you were thinking, “I don’t know what I can do.” Today’s first reading gives some examples of what can be done: “Share your bread with the hungry, shelter the oppressed and the homeless; clothe the naked when you see them, and do not turn your back on your own.” Those same instructions give added depth to Jesus’ words in today’s gospel: “You are the salt of the earth and you are the light of the world.” Jesus tells this to his disciples but it isn’t just praising them, he is challenging them. Being the “light of the world and salt of the earth” comes with responsibilities. As lights, we draw people in darkness to ourselves—but then we are supposed to lead them to Jesus; we do not shine for our own sake or from our light—it is the light of Christ which shines through us and we must use that light to help others encounter Jesus.

What about the salt of the earth? We hear that said about people, but what does it really mean? Salt enhances the flavor of food. Salt acts as a preservative; in the days before refrigeration, meat was heavily salted so that it could be stored and eaten later. In this sense of “salt of the earth,” Jesus is commanding his followers to make the society around it better. Christians are called to bring out the best in our neighbors—which can often happen when we perform works of mercy. We also work to preserve society by charitably addressing and trying to correct the injustices in our society. Remember, though, that too much salt can ruin a meal—so we need to work subtly unless more drastic measures are urgently called for. Salt has at least one other property: it melts ice. The scriptures are full of references to hard-hearted people. Part of our mission as disciples of Jesus is to help him melt those hearts so that the Holy Spirit can enter in and go to work.

Both of Jesus’ positive statements—you are the salt of the earth and you are the light of the world—come with warnings. We might think back to the various parables of the talents in which a servant was called wicked for not using the gifts given to him to help the kingdom of heaven to grow. Lights can not be left under a basket to shine solely for themselves; that is not the purpose for which they were created. Similarly, salt that loses its flavor is good for nothing except for being trampled into the ground.

How does salt lose its flavor? Actually, salt left on its own is a fairly stable substance. It doesn't so much lose its flavor as it becomes diluted or contaminated. When exposed to strong aromatics, salt can take on the flavor of those other substances—look up the term “infused salts” when you get home today. For salt that we are going to eat with our meals, that is okay—just don't overdo it. For disciples of Jesus who are supposed to preserve and enhance the world we live in, that could be a problem. When we read the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy in the Old Testament, we may find them painfully full of very detailed laws and rituals. One of the reasons for this is that God was trying to use those laws to keep his people safe from the corruptive practices of their neighbors. The mission of the Jews was to lead people closer to the one true God. Unfortunately, the scriptures show that over and over again, instead of being the salt that enhanced their world, many Israelites adopted the practices of their neighbors and lost their flavor.

Can that happen to us? It can and it is happening...but rather than dive into that right now and go out on such a sour note, I just want us all to reflect on how perhaps we have allowed our lights to grow dim and our “good” saltiness to be overcome by less desirable flavors. I will be coming back to this, though, so don't think I am letting us off the hook.

Light and salt refer to two of our primary senses: sight and taste. I am going to close with a prayer composed by Saint John Henry Newman which includes a reference to a third sense, our sense of smell. This prayer was also a favorite of Mother Theresa's:

“Dear Jesus, help us to spread your fragrance everywhere we go. Flood our souls with your spirit and life. Penetrate and possess our whole being so utterly, that our lives may only be a radiance of yours. Shine through us, and be so in us, that every person we should come in contact with may feel your presence in our soul. Let them look up and see no longer us, but only Jesus. Stay with us, and then we shall begin to shine as you shine; so to shine as to be a light to others; the light, Jesus, will be all from you. None of it will be ours. It will be you shining on others through us. Let us thus praise you in the way you love best, by shining on those around us. Let us preach you without preaching: not by words, but by our example, by the catching force, the sympathetic influence of what we do, the evident fullness of the love our hearts bear for you. Amen.”