

Fifth Sunday of Ordinary Time
February 9, 2020
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Reflection

In today's Gospel, "Jesus said to his disciples, 'You are the salt of the earth.'" With these words he gives us our identity and our mission.

When we think of salt, we mostly think of it as a seasoning for food. It improves its flavour by bringing out its taste, making it what it's meant to be. Christians in the world transform it through acts of love, by speaking praise to God on behalf of creation, by following Jesus who gives of himself. Some have imagined a world without religion, without the hope of heaven, with nothing greater than ourselves. But when put into practice, this dream pales into pride, greed and violence: vice and sin that counters life.

For the ancients, salt was necessary for life. It was more than a flavour, but a means to preserve food. Salt takes out the water, and inhibits the growth of harmful bacteria. The Church does preserve the good news given by Jesus to the apostles; words received in faith that bring us to eternal life; words recorded in Scripture and spoken in liturgy. But it's not enough to keep the faith to ourselves, nestled closely against the wind, worried that it will blow away if we don't keep it hidden away safely. The Archbishop likes to ask, "Are you keeping the faith?" You say, "Yes, Your Grace." He says, "You should be giving it away!"

Is 58:6-10
Ps 112
1 Cor 2:1-5
Mt 5:13-16

Salt has another use. To grow plants well, the earth needs to be fertilized. The ancients used various compounds as fertilizer, mostly bones, ash, husks and manure. Some also used different forms of salt. Too little wouldn't have much effect. Too much lumped together would damage the field. It needs to be spread widely, carefully, in the right amount. Jesus would tell his apostles, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations (Mt 28:19)." They and their followers were like fertilizer spread over the earth so that faith could grow.

And there is a difference between salt and the earth it fertilizes. Salt is distinctive. The people of God are distinguished by being born anew by faith and baptism. We have Jesus as our head, and are anointed with the Holy Spirit. We are sons of God commanded to love as Jesus loved, with a mission to be the seed of unity, hope and salvation destined for the Kingdom. So Jesus gives us a warning. "If salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot." If we compromise, lose our distinctiveness, blend into the crowd, then our identity is gone and our mission failed.

It doesn't seem possible for salt to lose its taste. We buy a box of it, and it lasts for years without changing at all. Baptism is like that. It marks your soul with an indelible stamp that doesn't wear off.

The seal cannot be removed or forgotten, so a lapsed Catholic mired in sin is one confession away from the state of grace. But his warning stands. "If salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot." It's important to understand how salt was sold in ancient days. It didn't come pure in a box, but in a cloth bag that you would dip into the cooking pot. The salt in the bag was mixed with rocks, sand and minerals. Over time, the salt would dissolve completely. It would lose its taste, and the remains dumped onto the sidewalk.

Our baptism does persist, but we do need to restore the faith within us. It's like refilling a box of salt by boiling down water from the ocean, since God is an inexhaustible source of grace. Strive in your moral life, and continue your good works. "The witness of a Christian life and good works done in a supernatural spirit have great power to draw men to the faith and to God (2045)." Build up the Church by growing in holiness, and by aiding the poor; even through your failings. And grow in knowledge of the faith according to your station in life.

Jesus tells us that salt can lose its taste. This expression had a second meaning. Losing taste also meant becoming foolish. God shared his wisdom with us through revelation; first through the prophets and then fully in his Son. We can turn away from his wisdom through our choices. Paul chose the opposite. "For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified." And these words give us consolation.

As we age, we might begin to forget things that we used to know so well. But we can cling to Jesus even as age and sickness wear us down to "weakness and fear and trembling." Then we demonstrate our faith as the Spirit and power of God. "That person's heart is steady and will not be afraid. One who has distributed freely, who has given to the poor; their righteousness endures forever; their name is exalted in honour."