

Homily for the 5th Sunday in Ordinary Time

February 8-9, 2020

Readings: Isaiah 58:7-10; 1 Corinthians 2: 1-5; Matthew 5: 13-16

Preacher: Sr. Joan Sobala

One of the challenges to any preacher is how to offer a new insight into the Gospel of the day, especially when the text is very familiar. Today's Gospel presents us with two such familiar sayings of Jesus: "You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world..."

To find a nugget or two of insight into them, I picked up one of the valuable reference books I use when preparing a homily or presentation. It's a vast volume called the *New Revised Standard Version Exhaustive Concordance*, which offers the reader the citation for every proper name and significant word used in the Scripture.

In the *Concordance*, the word "salt" is mentioned 45 times in the combined Old and New Testaments and...get ready... the word "light" shows up 210 times in the Old Testament, 50 times in the Gospels and 40 times elsewhere in the New Testament. The Scriptures are well salted and full of light!

These facts tell us a couple of things: first, that the Scriptural people valued both seasoning and light as God's gifts for the sake of life and second, that Jesus knew his Scripture well. The Hebrew Scripture—what we call the Old Testament—became part of Him as He grew, so that He carried its life-engendering message within Him until it burst forth into words for His listeners and followers to hear and absorb.

Salt by itself is useless. It is virtuously unobtrusive, virtually unnoticed until it is missing. It needs to be put into use, engaged with other ingredients to season, preserve, and disinfect. People use salt as a unit of exchange. (Salzburg, Austria is so named because, there, salt was distributed as the coin of the realm to soldiers.) It also enters into historic ritual ceremonies as a sign of purification.

Some scholars believe that the salt of the earth is not table salt but rather those minerals in the soil, which were known—even in Jesus’ time—to be necessary for the earth to bear fruit.

Jesus does not say His followers are to be *salt*, but rather, the *salt of the earth*—to be mixed up with the earth, mixed up with our world, into all possible human affairs to make Christ’s message savory. Salt also tenderizes. We are called to bring out God’s tenderness in all we do.

Light alone is useless, too. Somewhere I read, “Light alone is blinding. Light alone does not make you see anything at all. Light alone is shone into the eyes of tortured prisoners to make them confess. Light alone hurts.”

But Jesus says, “You are the light of the world.” We light up the world so that others can see, we brighten the world, and make the hidden visible. It’s risky to set a lamp on a lampstand. After all, some people don’t want to see or be seen. They might want us to shut out the light.

Jesus doesn’t ask us to do the impossible. He is asking only that we do the best we can in life. Are there people whose day would light up if we noticed them, visited them, called them? Is there one person caught up in life’s routines or wearied by life’s struggles who might need the encouragement of a new flavor, a new zest for life?

And what about our part in building up the Reign of God? We live in a big, often dangerous world. What can we do to be salt and light beyond our homes, our borders so that others may live?

The recently canonized John Henry Newman wrote, “I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons. He has not created me for nothing. I shall do good. I shall do His work.” I hope so. I hope we do God’s work. I believe we can, but not until we have each worked at realizing our potential through God’s power and grace—until we become salt and light for our world. Then our God-given values and our behavior would indeed be seasoning for a stale, gloomy world.

Along the road of life, “Your light must shine before others, that they may see the good that you do and give glory to God (Matthew 5:16)... And don’t forget to let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you know how you should respond to one another.” (Colossians 4:6)