

February 5, 2023
5th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Matthew 5:13-16

Jesus said to his disciples: "You are the salt of the earth. But if salt loses its taste, with what can it be seasoned? It is no longer good for anything but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.

You are the light of the world. A city set on a mountain cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and then put it under a bushel basket; it is set on a lampstand, where it gives light to all in the house. Just so, your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father.

Background:

Matthew often describes Jesus' teaching to the crowds and to the disciples. After his own baptism, Jesus moved to Capernaum where he began to preach. After calling the first disciples, Jesus is again described by Matthew as "proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom." (Matt 4:23) In the beginning of the fifth chapter, the disciples approached Jesus and he began to teach them. The first instruction Jesus gave them was the beatitudes. Jesus concluded the beatitudes by telling the disciples that they should consider themselves blessed "when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you falsely because of me." (Matt 5:11) The gospel text for this week follows with more statements about those who have chosen to become his followers. Jesus draws on salt and light, two common household items, as he asks them to see themselves anew.

Salt was not only used as a seasoning, but it was and is now essential for sustaining life. It was an important preservative, a bleaching agent, used in purifying food, and a catalyst in the community oven. Because of the scarcity of wood, camel or donkey dung were mixed with salt, shaped into patties and dried. The dried patties were then placed on slabs of unrefined salt and used as fuel in ovens. The salt acted as a catalyst in burning the dung. Eventually the salt was absorbed and all that remained was a block of minerals. The blocks were placed in mud roads and paths, especially during the rainy season. Matthew uses both functions of the mineral block—the oven and the foot path—when he says to the disciples 'you are salt for the "earth-ovens." The word used carries both meanings, "earth" and "clay oven."

Salt was an important seasoning. Because salt was such an essential part of daily life, it was natural that it would be incorporated into people's religious life also. Leviticus records that each cereal offering must be seasoned with salt. "Every cereal offering that you present to the Lord shall be seasoned with salt. Do not let the salt of the covenant of your God be lacking from your cereal offering. On every offering you shall offer salt." (Lev 2:13)

The scriptures also indicate that salt became associated with the gift of wisdom. "Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you know how you should respond to each one." (Col 4:5) Jesus used this rich symbol to instruct his disciples on how they were to be of service not to themselves, but to others.

The other rich symbol used in this text is that of light. Light was part of even poor and modest one-room homes that usually only had one small window. A single light was placed on a lampstand that provided light for the house. Without the use of matches, these lights were valued and protected. In a world without artificial illumination in buildings and on streets, light could be seen from a great distance. These lights were a welcome sight to travelers caught in the wilderness and in the darkness.

Here Jesus has taken two common but essential elements of everyday life and used them to instruct his disciples. He tells them that they are the salt of the earth and they are the light of the world. He does not say that "if you do this," or that "you will be like" the salt of the earth and light of the world. He asks as the rhetorical question of what if salt loses its taste. The disciples all know that salt does not lose its taste, just as the light of a city on a hill can not be hidden. Jesus is teaching them about their new identity as his disciples, an identity that they themselves may not even perceive or understand.

Reflection Questions:

1. Has anyone commented about a quality that they have observed in you, that you yourself were not aware of? Do you recall how you responded when you heard the comment?
2. What are some of your favorite spices? How would your enjoyment of food change if the only seasoning you knew of was salt?
3. What do you think was going through the minds of those early disciples as they heard Jesus say to them that they were the salt of the earth and the light of the world?
4. If a person is described as being the salt of the earth, what would you expect them to be like?
5. Can you also think of places in the gospel where Jesus seems to be a person who set fires within his community?
6. The last line of the gospel states that our good works are to be done so that others first of all see our good works, and second, are led by them to praise God. Do you find these words a comfort, a challenge, an encouragement, or something entirely different?
7. What would you like to tell Jesus about what you are feeling as you hear this gospel today?

The gospel background and reflection questions are written by Fr. Paul Gallagher, OFM. They are edited by Sister Anne Marie Lom, OSF and Joe Thiel. The excerpts from the Sunday readings are prepared by Joe Thiel. To be added to the distribution list, send your name and email address to annemarie.lom@gmail.com

Our Gospel Reflections are hosted by the Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity. Their homepage is <https://fscclalledtobe.org/>. One link there is labeled Franciscan Gospel Reflections. A click there will take you to the Gospel reflections for the upcoming Sunday. By following this link, you will be able to blog or comment on the reflection questions. The material will be posted on Fridays and will be available until the following Friday when the new material is posted.

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Excerpts from the readings for February 5, 2023, the Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Thus says the Lord:

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.
Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your wound shall quickly be healed;
your vindication shall go before you, and the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.
Then you shall call for help, and the Lord will answer and say: Here I am!
If you remove oppression, false accusation and malicious speech;
if you bestow your bread on the hungry and satisfy the afflicted;
then light shall rise for you in the darkness,
and the gloom shall become for you like midday.

*The just man is a light in darkness to the upright; he is gracious and merciful and just.
Well for the man who is gracious and lends, who conducts his affairs with justice.
He shall never be moved; the just one shall be in everlasting remembrance.
An evil report he shall not fear; his heart is firm, trusting in the Lord.
His heart is steadfast; he shall not fear. Lavishly he gives to the poor;
His justice shall endure forever; his horn shall be exalted in glory.*

When I came to you, brothers and sisters, proclaiming the mystery of God,
I did not come with sublimity of words or of wisdom.

For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.
I came to you in weakness and fear and much trembling,
and my message and my proclamation were not with persuasive words of wisdom,
but with a demonstration of Spirit and power,
so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.

Jesus said to his disciples: "You are the salt of the earth.
But if salt loses its taste, with what can it be seasoned?
It is no longer good for anything but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.
You are the light of the world. A city set on a mountain cannot be hidden.
Nor do they light a lamp and then put it under a bushel basket;
it is set on a lampstand, where it gives light to all in the house.
Just so, your light must shine before others,
that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father."

Excerpts from Isaiah 58:7-10; Psalm 112:4-9; 1 Corinthians 2:1-5; and Matthew 5:13-16

Friends,

Here are the gospel background and reflection questions for February 5th, as prepared by Franciscan spiritual director Fr. Paul Gallagher. In the gospel from Matthew, Jesus continues his teaching to the crowds in his Sermon on the Mount: "You are the salt of the earth, but if salt loses its taste, it has to be thrown out. You are the light of the world. Nor do they light a lamp and then put it under a basket. Your light must shine, that they may see your good deeds, and glorify the father."

The other readings also have references to light shining forth in the darkness, doing justice and good deeds, and giving glory to God. In the first reading, from Isaiah, the Lord says, "Share with the hungry, shelter the homeless, and clothe the naked. Then your light shall break forth like the dawn." Psalm 112 proclaims, "The just man is a light in the darkness for the upright. His horn shall be exalted in glory." The second reading is again from the first letter to the Corinthians, where Paul writes, "My message was not with persuasive words but with a demonstration of Spirit and power that your faith might rest on the power of God."

Immediately following the teaching of the beatitudes at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells his followers they are the salt of the earth, and then he says, "You are the light of the world." He explains to them that their light is like a city on a mountain, or a lamp on a lampstand, "where it gives light to all." He sincerely and strongly urges, "Your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify the Father." Along with this gospel, once more we get a first reading from Isaiah that supports the gospel with Old Testament prophecy and wisdom, and with more references to light breaking forth in the darkness. This past Christmas season and the Sundays of Ordinary time since then have been filled with scripture references to the light that we are encouraged to shine!

Joe