

Fr. Curtis Miller February 8-9, 2020

Homily for the 5th Sun. of O.T.

“You are the salt of the earth and the light of the world,” Jesus tells us in the Sermon on the Mount in today’s Gospel reading. But what does that mean? I’ve talked a lot recently about the symbolism of light, but what about salt?

It’s easy for us to take salt for granted, but it’s actually a necessity of life with many uses, and it’s a good analogy for the role Christians should play in the world. In the ancient world, meat, fish, and other foods needed to be treated with salt to preserve it from going bad. In just the same way, in the midst of a world that can often seem to be decaying into corruption, Christians are called to uphold values, like truth and love, to help reverse the tide of decline.

Salt was also so valuable in the ancient world that it was used as payment or a measurement of wealth. The Latin word for salt ‘sal’ is where we get the word ‘salary.’ We even use the phrase, “To be worth one’s salt.” As Christians, do we add value to our community, contributing through active engagement and service?

As it is today, salt was also used as a seasoning. Without it, food can be bland. We notice when it’s absent or too little. If we weren’t here, would our absence be noticeable? I’m a little out of season, but many of you must have seen the Christmas movie *It’s a Wonderful Life*. It’s about a man who sees what the world would have been like if he’d never been born. Without him, he sees that his hometown had become a cruel, selfish place. He never thought that he did anything particularly important, but just by living an ordinary life of goodness and kindness he had made a positive difference. That’s the kind of difference we’re supposed to make as Christians.

Seasoning also has the power to bring out the flavors that are already there, it brings out the best. Do you and I bring out the best in others? Or do we bring things down with negativity, complaining, backbiting, and gossip? Every one of us has good and bad qualities. As Christians, we’re called to bring out the best in others. (Relatedly, we have to be careful about who we spend time with. Is this someone who brings out the best in me or who pulls me down to my baser inclinations? Is this someone I can lift up or is it only someone who brings me down?)

Salt is also necessary for bodily health (though admittedly too much is as bad as too little). When someone is faint or dehydrated, one of the substances they need to be revived and nourished is salt. Do we as Christians have that kind of

reviving effect on the people around us who are discouraged or fainthearted? Are we sources of encouragement and uplift?

This time of year, what are we using a lot of salt for? [Pause.] For melting ice on the roads and sidewalks. Just so, the presence of a Christian, really living the way Jesus teaches, has the power to melt hearts that have become cold, cynical, or unfeeling. Just our words aren't enough; people are only convinced when they see us living according to the Gospel. Being a faithful Christian should make you and me more peaceful and joyful. People should be able to notice that, not so that they'll praise us, but because they will also be inspired to want to follow God in their lives, to have that same peace and joy.

Salt is different from the rest. It stands out. Just like the light that Jesus also calls us to be, it can't be hidden. Are we willing to stand out as Christians, not just when it's popular, but especially when it could make some people dislike us? I don't mean that we have to go out of our way to be pushy about our faith, but we all know that there are moments when taking a stand for our faith will not be popular. But if we're unwilling to do that, then we'll just blend in, we won't make any difference. We'll be like the light hidden under a bushel basket or the salt that has lost its flavor. Jesus calls us to be outstanding and inspiring, not just to go with the flow.

One way that we can be salt and light is to live out our vocation the best we can. This weekend is World Marriage Day and I'll have a special blessing for married couples at the end of Mass. But we can sometimes forget that marriage is a vocation from God and it's a particularly powerful way of being salt and light, of being a witness of God's love in the world. This is true of the joyful love of newlyweds, but it's also true of the couple that has been faithful throughout many years, who have borne with each other's weaknesses and sins with mercy, and who have cared for sick or dying spouses with self-sacrificial love. In all these ways, married couples are like a shining light showing the world what God's love looks like in action.

Whatever our own vocation may be, the fact is that every single one of us makes a difference in the world. The question is: What kind of difference will you make? With God's help, let us truly be the salt of the earth and the light of the world by making this world better and holier by the way we live.