

Homily
5th Sunday in OT / A / 2017
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Our Gospel today is taken from the beginning of Mt's Sermon on the Mount—the teachings of Jesus that go to the very heart of Christianity. Today's reading follows immediately upon the Beatitudes: blessed are the poor, the meek, the merciful, those who mourn, those who hunger and thirst, and so on.

Jesus compares the disciples to “salt,” and “light,” and a “city on a hill.” And why is that? Because salt, light, and a city on the hill are not so important in themselves—but for what they do. Take a look at salt . . .

Salt seasons food. In fact, when we say that something tastes good, it usually means that there is salt in it. Salt also preserves—this was more common in the ancient world than it is today. People would add salt to meat to cure it and preserve it. And there was another purpose for salt in the ancient world that probably comes into play here: salt can destroy, rendering the earth infertile. When the Romans destroyed a city, they would “salt the earth” around it so that nothing could grow there. Season. Preserve. Destroy.

And light . . . light doesn't exist for itself: it illuminates other things. It helps us to see.

And a city on a hill. Such a city is a navigation point. Travelers at night would see the lights of a city, and it would direct them on the way. Like a lighthouse, steering one away from danger, leading one home.

The images of salt, light, and a city on the hill encourage us to move beyond what I call “a privatization of religion” into something much bigger and broader and more active—something that will truly influence our culture and society. I suppose many of us in our individualist society think of religion as something that “makes me feel better,” it “enriches my life.” Me and Jesus. And that is true.

But Biblical religion is something much more than that (check out the first reading from Isaiah). Biblical religion is more like salt, light, and a city on a hill. It has a purpose. It is meant to do something. We become salt, and light, and a city on a hill for the good of others—and the good of our entire culture.

So, practically speaking, what does it mean that Christians are “like salt” in the world? It means that we enhance and preserve what is good in our society, what is moral and ethical. But salt can also destroy. Christians as salt eliminate what is dysfunctional, and immoral, and unethical in our society. Christians should flavor society with the Beatitudes, taking an active role in politics, in education, in commerce, in law, and so on. If we don’t, then we are like that salt that “loses its taste” and is good for nothing—thrown out and trampled under foot.

And light? Christians are meant to be light. Light helps us to see what is beautiful and good, on the one hand, but also what is ugly and rotten on the other. Christians shine a light on the world and on our culture, indicating the beautiful and the good. Helping people to see! But Christians also have to shine a light on what is rotten and diseased—so people can see it, and take action. Dark corners hate light—and Christians will find opposition. But a light must fulfil its purpose: to illuminate us, and our society.

And finally, a city on a hill. Christians are like a city on the hill. Many people in our society have lost their way—they are looking for a beacon, a lighthouse, that will take them safely to shore. That city is you—it is all Christians, guiding the world away from darkness and into the safety of light.

When Christians don’t act, the world is flavorless, dark, and lost. Some of the worst atrocities in our history occurred because Christians did not speak up. The salt that lost its taste!

But when Christians do act, we are salt, and light, and a city on the hill, fulfilling our purpose, and making the world a better place.