

Krijtberg, February 4, Fifth Sunday through the year,
Isa 58:7-10, Mt 5:13-16.

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SALT FOR THE EARTH AND LIGHT FOR THE WORLD

Last Sunday's gospel was about the Beatitudes, the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, one of the most appealing and inspiring texts in the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus is pictured here as a new Moses, teaching the people from the mountain. He gives, as it were, a new translation of the old Law, gets to the heart of it. What we hear in today's gospel reading is a follow up to the Beatitudes. Jesus tells us to be like salt and like light.

Salt

Salt and light are basic human needs. The Roman writer Pliny the Elder (23-79 AD), contemporary of the evangelist Matthew, already pointed this out: *sal and sol, salt and sun: this is what the body needs most*. The Bible takes the same view. We read there that salt purifies: Elisha sprinkled salt in a well with bad water to purify it (2 Kings 2:19-22). A newborn baby was washed and rubbed with salt (Ez. 16:4). Salt keeps from spoiling and gives flavor. Regarding the latter, we read in the book of Job: *Does one eat bland food without salt, is there flavor in the white of an egg? I turn away from such food, it is repugnant* (6:6-7). Salt is used to fertilize the soil (Lk 14:35). Even sacrifices had to be salted. We read in Leviticus: *You will put salt in every cereal offering that you offer, and you will not fail to put the salt of the covenant of your God on your cereal offering; to every offering you will add an offering of salt to your God.* (2:13). Salt thus makes the sacrifice a sign of the covenant.

This salt, praised by Pliny and the Bible, is applied by Jesus to his audience: *You are salt for the earth*. Salt dissolved in water, or mixed with food is invisible. This image fits the poor in spirit, the

gentle, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, congratulated in the Beatitudes (Mt 5:3-10). It depicts a hidden power, which makes life possible and humane.

Light

Apart from salt, sun and light are vital. Light also appears in the Bible. The first words God speaks in Scripture are about light: *God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light. God saw that light was good* (Gen. 1:3-4). God is creator of light that makes us live. In the psalms, God is called light to man: *Lord, you yourself are my lamp, my [God lights](#) up my darkness* (ps. 18:29), *[The](#) Lord is my light and my salvation, whom should I fear?* (ps. 27:1).

Jesus applies the image of light to the people listening to him: *You are light for the world*. So it is man's calling to radiate the divine light, to be light himself. How? What does that light consist of? We find an answer in the first reading. Isaiah looks around and observes that people are obediently doing their religious obligations and fasting at prescribed times. But he also sees that at the same time they are quarrelling with each other while fasting (Isa 58:3-4). He contrasts this with his conception of true fasting: *Is not this the sort of [fast](#) that pleases me: is it not sharing your food with the hungry, and sheltering the homeless poor; if you see someone lacking clothes, to clothe him? Then your light [will](#) rise in the darkness, and your darkest hour [will](#) be like noon* (Isa 58:6-8.10). Isaiah indicates how people can be light: when they care about each other, it becomes light on earth. The same is also said in the Gospel reading. Jesus calls his listeners light that must shine in people's sight so that everybody can see their good deeds: share bread with each other and shelter everyone.

The difference between salt and light

So Jesus' disciples are salt and light. The two are not the same. Salt is a hidden force, while light is visible. Sharing things like bread and shelter with others happens openly. Jesus speaks here of a city on a

mountain and of a lamp not being put away under a bushel, but placed on a stand, visible to all. These words seem to contradict what we hear further on in the Sermon on the Mount: do not give alms to be praised by men (Mt 6:2). But these words are in a different context. Here, almsgiving is mentioned at the same time as prayer and fasting: pious practices ostentatiously practiced by hypocrites to be praised by people. But he who acts in accordance with the Beatitudes and is salt and light in society does not focus attention on himself, but on God: *In the same way your light must shine in people's sight, so that, seeing your good works, they may give praise to your Father in heaven.* (Mt 5:16). Where people are good to one another, there God is at work, there, so to speak, God happens. Where people are light to each other, there God's light shines.

Small things can have great effects. A little salt gives flavor to a whole loaf of bread. A simple oil lamp in a house where all are gathered in one room, shines for all. The salt in the bread and the light of the oil lamp symbolizes the gentle forces to bring about change in a dull and dark world. Ordinary people gathered around Jesus on the mountain, ordinary people like us, are told: *You are salt for the earth. You are light for the world.*