

Today we look at Jesus calling his disciples to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

In parts of the Old Testament, salt is described like we use it today, to give food flavor. Without salt, meals will be bland and tasteless - even though salt-free Ms. Dash is pretty good.

But priests in the Old Testament made heavy use of salt on sacrifices as a symbol of purity, as a preservative, and in some rituals. Then and now, salt has many roles in purification, preservation, fidelity, worship, and, of course, for taste – especially in joyful celebrations involving food.

Jesus says, “If salt loses its taste, with what can it be seasoned?” In other words, if it’s not good for anything, you throw it away. So if a disciple loses their joy and their ability to bring the truth of Jesus to their world, they’re worthless as disciples. Sounds a bit harsh. But without this salt, there is no way we’re going to be able to bring the world to God.

Now the voice of the former Chemistry teacher... real salt – sodium chloride - doesn't lose its flavor, it doesn't become un-salty. So Jesus must not be talking about real salt. I think he is trying to make a point with us. Like salt, we're meant to add a certain flavor to the world, and if we lose that saltiness, we're worthless, we're not living up to who we are called to be.

What about the light of the world? Israel's vocation wasn't simply to be the people of God. Israel's vocation was to be the shining light to all the nations. In this passage, Jesus tells his disciples that they are called to be the light to the world.

So as disciples, we are to be the example that leads all the nations to faith in God and to right worship - to “glorify your heavenly Father” – right here at Mass!

Jesus uses the image of a household lamp. He's probably describing a little clay oil lamp that was common at the time. People would put it on a lampstand to give light to a house in darkness. Sticking it under a basket would defeat the purpose.

Jesus says that his disciples are called to be the light of the world by letting their good works shine before others. Some Christian traditions reject the idea that acts of charity have any value. The idea goes back to Martin Luther - that we are saved by faith alone and works don't enter into it. You definitely don't see that kind of thinking in the Gospels. Jesus emphasizes the critical role that good works play, not just in the salvation of an individual person's soul, but in the salvation of the world.

The good works of his disciples are the visible means that draw others into the kingdom of God. And the goal is not so that each individual gets the glory, but so that God the Father might be glorified – as we do here at Mass.

So is Jesus the light of the world or are his disciples the light of the world? The answer is yes to both. The light that disciples shine on the world comes through our imitation of Jesus, since he is the source of all of the light of the Gospel.

Our first reading describes how good works and acts of charity can be light to others. By such action, Israel will bring light to a world that's full of suffering and darkness and sin. That's what charity does in this world. That's what the people of Israel were called to do. That's what we are called to do.

According to the archdiocesan Beacons of Light process, a Family of Parishes must continue to promote a culture of life, charity and justice through organized ministries. A month or so ago in our Small Church Communities, we reviewed the many charity, respect life, social action and inclusion activities that are already taking place in our Family of Parishes. Your involvement in parish ministries are some ways that you can be the salt and light to your world. So yes, the Church has a role to identify and counteract sin and evil, and to preserve society from total decay and dissolution.

But sometimes Catholics are tempted to think that that's the work of missionaries or consecrated religious. But if you look at Jesus' teaching, it's very clear that this call is not just for consecrated religious or the clergy. It's something that every disciple of Jesus is called to. So it's

a pretty sobering message. If you're a disciple of Jesus and follow his Sermon on the Mount, you really don't have a choice when it comes to engaging in acts of charity and works of mercy. It's the job of every disciple.

As salt, we are called to sanctify the world and bring the world to God. As light, our good works are meant draw other people into the kingdom of God. By virtue of our confirmation, we are called to witness to Jesus in our homes, classrooms, workplaces and communities.

There are all kinds of ways to apply this within family life. Actions like looking after a sick neighbor or helping a child with their homework. As disciples, we aren't all called to do extraordinary things. We can respond to this call within our family, with our brothers or sisters or elderly parents.

A large part of a young parent's life and time is taken up by engaging in corporal works of mercy like feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, caring for the sick. Even visiting the imprisoned (if one of the kids gets sent to their room.)

We are all called to be salt and light within our own state of life. One of the most powerful ways to do this is through acts of charity and the corporal works of mercy, which help us to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world, to shine before others as a witness to the Gospel, and inspire others to "glorify your heavenly Father" by coming here to worship the one true God.

Amen?

With thanks to John Bergsma and Brant Pitre.

- Deacon Jack Schaefer