

St Mark's, Niagara on the Lake
The Fifth Sunday after Epiphany, year 'A'
5 February 2023
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If you've ever asked yourself why the food at restaurants tastes better than what you make yourself, the answer is: salt—plain and simple. Any chef will tell you that most home cooks are so nervous about over-salting their recipes that they err on the side of caution. And it is a shocking experience to learn just how much salt actually goes into the Bolognese sauce at our favorite Italian restaurant.

This is not to say that salt can be overused. It can be oppressive. It can be destructive. Sometimes those professional chefs are too liberal with their use of salt, thereby ruining that lovely plate of pasta. But salt can be destructive in other ways, too. According to legend, the Roman general Scipio plowed-over and sowed the city of Carthage with salt after defeating it in the Third Punic War, thereby ensuring that nothing would ever again grow in those lands.

Jesus said "You are the salt of the earth." So if we are to be the salt of the earth, we must be careful and appropriate, always aware that there is the potential to become unwelcome, oppressive, and destructive.

And then there's light, the other image in this morning's gospel. Without light, life could not exist, and this planet would be a cold rock drifting through space, since the light of the sun is not only a source of illumination but is also our principal source of energy and nourishment—something you and I are well aware of during these winter months! Sometimes we speak of being "enlightened." To be enlightened is to be spiritually and intellectually insightful. Alexander Pope's couplet,

*Nature and nature's laws lay hid in night,
God said, 'Let Newton be', and all was light*

succinctly captures the great intellectual, scientific, philosophical, and moral advancements of the last three and half centuries.

Jesus said, "You are the light of the world." We also know that light can burn; it can blind; it can confuse. So if we're to be the light of the world we need to take care, lest we become a scorching, obscuring and perplexing presence to those around us.

Yet the world beyond these four walls is an oppressive, over-saturated, glittering, and often blinding place. When we think about those who live in the glare of society, those who are prominent, those who dazzle and enchant us, we are tempted to measure ourselves against them. Or when we ponder with amazement the institutions and establishments of our civilization, the powerful corporations with the gleaming logos, seductive promises, and robust balance sheets, we're tempted to believe that in order to be really effective, the Church must be more like them.

Remember how last week we heard Jesus say that the meek will inherit the earth. This is a prophecy that has yet to be fulfilled: the rich and the powerful, and brash, and confident have inherited the earth, and the meek have been sent away empty. Given the state of things, how can we speak with any conviction and purpose when we ourselves are enthralled by our oversaturated, neon-lit world?

Most people's experiences of Christianity in our society are of the sort and variety found on television and in popular culture. It's glitzy and appealing, this kind of Christianity, because it's so attractive, so clean, so palatable. Sometimes we're tempted to believe that the way to get this parish really going is to model ourselves after what are sometimes pejoratively called the "mega churches." After all, they seem to have it all: better attendance, better programs, young families, and lots of money. And perhaps they do.

But we mustn't assume that success is shown in numbers alone, nor can we afford to be smug and superior. Being salt and light means that we are called to the sacred task of seasoning the world with God's Word and enlightening it with divine love.

The returns on this kind of investment can't be shown on a balance sheet, nor can they be truly measured by mere statistics. It's subtle and often subversive work, and sometimes even unsatisfying work. It's work that's forged one link at a time, is seasoned gently and with great care, and is enlightened little by little and person-by-person.

We're called to be salt and light—to be God's love—to all those who have been left behind and forgotten by the world: the confused, the lost, the despised, the hungry, the ill, and the dying. God calls each one of us to look out on the world and to see that there is grime that needs to be cleansed, that there is hurt that needs to be healed, that there is thirst that needs to be slaked, that there is sight that needs to be focused, that there is darkness that needs to be banished, that there is love that needs to be given, and that there is life *yet* to be lived.

You are the eyes of God. You are the hands of God. You are the feet of God. You are the voice of God. You are the face of God. You are the love of God. You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.