

Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time – A

Did you ever try to un-salt what you were cooking?

It's pretty much impossible. Once salt has gotten into the food, the only thing you can do is try to dilute it.

That's an interesting fact to remember as we listen to today's Gospel.

When Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth and the light of the world," the "you" he was addressing were the disciples who had just heard him say,

"Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you because of me."

That's the first of the beatitudes that is addressed directly to those who are there. All the others are "Blessed are they..."

Persecution will come from being salt, from making a difference that cannot be undone.

We have any number of examples of disciples of Jesus who have fit this profile: proclaiming his message, being persecuted for it, often unto death, only for the persecutors to discover that there's no way to undo what the disciple had done:

St. Joan of Arc, St. Thomas More, Martin Luther King, Jr., Bishop Oscar Romero, the U.S. missionaries martyred in El Salvador.

An early Christian author by the name of Tertullian once wrote that was futile to persecute Christians. He noted that persecution ends up causing even greater numbers to take up the cause of following Jesus.

That was the experience of the early Church.

There was even a saying that resulted from it: "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church."

Eventually, the emperor Constantine understood that message and stopped the persecutions.

He issued an edict of toleration and the Church went mainstream.

From one point of view you can say that perhaps that's when the saltiness of the Church began to be diluted.

When it no longer becomes costly to be a disciple of Jesus, all manner of people can claim it, and have.

In some cases, being Christian was even good for a person's career. It was the "correct" thing to do.

But that has nothing to do with saltiness, with being the person who makes a difference for the sake of Christ and his Gospel.

Which brings us to the other image that Jesus uses – that of being a light

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for the world. Here it's hard to think of individual lights being up to the task.

I think the light of the world image is a good reminder to us that we follow Jesus as a community of disciples.

It's only in community that we develop enough "throw weight" to move something like a nation toward the kingdom of God.

The work of welcoming God's reign into our midst will never be complete if it remains just an individual endeavor.

It requires that we join together. Even a well-placed light has limits as to what it can illuminate. But lights together can enlighten the world.

Isaiah describes what Jesus' communities of salt and light look like: They enlighten the world because in them the hungry are fed, the homeless are taken in, and everybody watches out for one another.

They won't dilute their message, and they don't worry about what it costs because they don't believe they can afford to live in the darkness of another kind of world.

At the end of each Mass, along with the final blessing, the priest dismisses the people by saying "The Mass is ended, go in peace."

One of the options for that dismissal is "Go in peace to proclaim the Gospel with your lives." We could also easily say, "Go, in peace to be salt and light or the world."