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# Light and Salt: Faith into Action

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## **Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

Sunday Readings for February 9, 2014 for Cycle A:

Is 58:7-10; Ps 112:4-9; 1 Cor 2:1-5; Mt 5:13-16

### **LIGHT AND SALT: FAITH INTO ACTION**

*Lawrence E. Frizzell*

The riches of the liturgy are so varied and profound that we cannot absorb all their dimensions even in a lifetime of prayerful appreciation. To overcome superficiality we should focus our attention on one thread of thought which can be followed from one part of the Mass to another. This may be chosen according to the liturgical season, placing us in tune with the rhythm of the Church's prayer, or in response to a particular need or event in our personal, family or community life.

The theme of light dominates the readings from Isaiah and the Gospel, developing an aspect different from those of the Epiphany and the Third Sunday of Ordinary Time. So we might consider it again.

In celebrating the gifts of God the ancient Hebrew recognized light to be uniquely important. To avoid confusion that led many of their neighbors to worship the sun, the hymn of creation in Genesis (1:1-2:4) separates light from its bearers or servants, which are created only on the fourth day. The majesty and impressiveness of God are described with the image of light as divine garment (Ps 104:1). The liturgical experience of God's benign presence as illuminating led the priests to intercede for Israel: "May the Lord let his face shine upon you and be gracious to you" (Num 6:25). Psalm 19 draws an analogy between God's illuminating gift of sunlight and the light that comes from his Torah (instruction or Law). God's Word is a lamp illuminating the path of life (Ps 119:105). The Fourth Gospel takes the theme of light into its hymn celebrating the Word whereby the Father created the universe (Jn 1:1-5). As the new manifestation of God's presence and instruction, Jesus is the light of the world (Jn 8:12).

One shows appreciation for a gift by using it. How are we to reflect the luminous presence of God in our lives? The disciple of the great prophet Isaiah declared that this is achieved through the corporal acts of mercy. The penitential practice of fasting must be completed by "sharing your bread with the hungry, sheltering the oppressed and the homeless, clothing the naked..." (Is 58:7). These and similar activities are an imitation of God's loving care of the needy among his creatures.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus declares that his disciples are "the light of the world" (Mt 5:14) because they are children of God, the lightgiver. To fulfil its function of enlightening and warming, light must be exposed for all to enjoy. So Jesus postulates that people must see our good deeds; then they will glorify the heavenly Father (5:16). It must be clear to all from our way of acting that we are but responding to a call of Christ to imitate the heavenly Father. Moreover, whatever we share with the less fortunate is already a divine gift to all, so we are stewards or caretakers merely exercising our responsibility.

The second image used by Jesus draws attention to a resource to which local people had easy access. Salt, so essential to the diet that it was a form of currency and the monthly salary of soldiers, could be extracted easily from the mineral-laden waters of the Dead Sea. Jesus hopes that his disciples, though few in number, will have a salutary effect on the world at large. "You are the salt of the earth" (5:13), a precious gift that must not be taken for granted. The disciple must realize that the essential quality of salt can be lost. This is probably because Dead Sea salt had to be extracted from other minerals, which were left behind as residue. The disciple must likewise engage in an ongoing process of purification and cast aside the dross which might masquerade as the genuine gift that should be shared.

The Gospel according to Mark (9:49-50) records a parallel text that has additional elements. "Keep salt in yourselves and you will have peace with one another" (9:50). Scholars find this passage to be obscure. Perhaps the point is that God's gift must be kept carefully, not only for self-preservation and enhancement of one's life, but also shared as a mutual gift. Jesus expected his disciples to live harmoniously in a community and that made jostling for favored positions to be most obnoxious (Mk 9:33-37). Gifts of God are to be shared in such a way that the integrity of each person is enhanced. Then the community will be at peace and be able to extend gifts to "outsiders" in a way that will draw them more into the circle of God's love.