

Fifth Sunday in Ord Time + 8 Feb 2023 + Isa 58:7-10 + 1 Cor 2:1-5 + Matt 5:13-16

Today's Gospel immediately follows last Sunday's, which, if you recall, was the Beatitudes. And so today we are going to go deeper into some of the ideas that emerged from our consideration of the Beatitudes. So for a quick review, we said that Jesus is the perfect image of what the Beatitudes look like being lived out. They are difficult, no doubt about it. But when lived out, their reward is nothing less than communion with God the Father. This communion already begins in this life, but is only made perfect in heaven. And this communion with God is what it means to truly be "blessed" ("beati" is the Latin word for "blessed"). For this reason, we said that the beatitudes do not promise worldly "happiness," but rather something much deeper, something that lasts, and that is *joy*.

Now today, Jesus tells us that His disciples are to be *the salt of the earth* and *the light of the world*. So what does this mean, and how do we live out this call? Well, recall that in the ancient world, the function of salt was not as much to give flavor to food (as we think of it), but rather it was an extremely valuable preservative in a world without refrigeration. And sources of light, such as candles and oil for lamps, would have also been very valuable in an age without electricity. Light from fire would have been necessary simply for survival!

And so on a spiritual level, we can say that Jesus is calling His followers to not only preserve the way of life He is teaching them, holy and unspoiled, but also to make it known—to shine it—in order to dispel all the darkness in our world, and so save the world. *Teaching and living*—that is the method of evangelization—that is the way of life for a disciple. Now obviously, Jesus is also the perfect image of what this life looks like. But sometimes this can be a struggle for us, because we think, "well yeah, but He is God!" Now, Jesus was also true man, but the point remains that human images are very helpful for us. So for this reason I'd like to look at St. Paul as a model for how to be salt and light.

St. Paul was the greatest preacher and missionary in Church history. When he came to the newly-established church in Corinth he says in our 2nd reading that he came teaching: *proclaiming, he says, the mystery of God...not with sublimity of words, but rather, he says, I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified*. That's a powerful statement: "knowing nothing but Christ and Him crucified." What does this mean?

When St. Paul says he resolved to "know" Christ crucified, the Greek word for "know" here has two senses. First, it means to *see with one's eyes*. On the most basic level, we can claim to have knowledge of something if we have seen it "with our own eyes". We usually call this "familiarity." But the thing is, St. Paul was not present at the Lord's crucifixion, as far as we know. So what he is talking about here is the second, deeper meaning of this same Greek word; that is, to *"to grasp spiritual truth or reality from a physical level."*

For St. Paul, Christ crucified is not just a symbol (much less just a piece of jewelry as sadly the cross is for so many today!). Rather, St. Paul grasped the truth of what “Christ crucified” really means by *living it*, by experiencing it. Now St. Paul knew Christ crucified, but not like the 12 apostles knew Him. The only time that Paul actually met Jesus was one brief miraculous occurrence: when Jesus appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus. But that encounter with Jesus was so powerful that Paul was never the same. This is often our experience too. We may have a powerful encounter with God—at a retreat, in the Sacraments, in adoration, and so on—that leaves us forever changed. But those “Damascus experiences” are typically rare. St. Paul primarily knew Christ crucified in the same way that we do; through a life of faith.

The rest of Paul’s life shows us how an initial encounter is meant to be only the start of a relationship, a communion, that should grow deeper each day. For Paul, this growth deepened the same way it does for us: as he studied and preached God’s Word, received Christ’s body and blood in the Holy Eucharist, and lived in prayerful communion with Christ through the Holy Spirit. Eventually, this communion with God became *everything* to Paul; so much so that he could boldly write to the Galatians: *I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (2:20).*

In fact, this communion was so deep that St. Paul even knew Christ crucified in his own body. Meaning, Paul knew the suffering Jesus through his own physical sufferings that he endured when shining the light in the world. He endured beatings, stonings, hunger, calumny, and more, all for the sake of Christ and His Church. And yet, amazingly, he never lost faith. As he would later write to the Corinthians: *We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus.* Why did he endure all this? *So that, he concludes, the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies (II Cor 4:8-10).*

So Paul is a great model for Jesus’ teaching that we are called to be salt and light. We are called to teach the Cross of Christ, and to *live it*. And that may scare us, just as the Beatitudes are initially kind of scary. But again, that’s where the *joy* that comes from communion with God comes in. St. Paul may have been the author of the Letter to the Hebrews, in which we read that Jesus endured the cross *for the sake of the joy that lay before Him (12:2)*. That’s how Paul endured the Cross too. Joy—something that this world cannot give—is the result of communion with God the Father, and a gift of the Holy Spirit.

We are not alone in our crosses. The Lord went before us, and He is with us. Knowing Him, experiencing His nearness; that is the road to joy. And that is the way that we preserve and shine the merits of the Lord’s passion into the darkness of this world until He comes again.