

Homilies for the Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time:

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Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time, cycle A

By [Don L. Fischer](#)

SCRIPTURE: Isaiah 58:7-10; 1 Corinthians 2:1-5; Matthew 5:13-16

We have come to the end of this period called Ordinary Time, as we prepare next week to celebrate the first Sunday of Lent. What we have done in these Sundays we have just celebrated, in terms of the liturgy of the word, is that we have experienced a wonderful look at the ministry Jesus came to establish on the earth. There are so many fascinating things about Jesus, but clearly, one element is that Jesus was filled with an extraordinary power as he walked this earth. There are two signs of that power flowing through him. One is that he was extraordinarily committed in a covenant relationship with his Father-his Father was there for him-and he was there for his Father. There was great power in that relationship. Jesus was willing to do anything the Father asked. The other sign is that there was a light, an energy that poured out from Jesus that saw all things as they were and had an extraordinary ability to heal. Jesus brought peace and wholeness to people. I love the line from the Scriptures that says he simply walked into a room, and "everyone was cured." Everybody was healed.

I have spoken to you many times about what this healing might mean. In many cases, it was physical healing. It might also have been a deep, penetrating power that entered into people and put things together for them-healing them of their anxiety, fears, worry, and dread. Jesus gave people hope. The Messiah had always been seen as the one who would give people hope, wholeness, and goodness. Even though many thought the Messiah would be a more practical leader in the sense of coming along and fixing all the potholes in the roads, making sure there were no enemies, and reducing taxes, this man Jesus, who was the Messiah, was not so worried about those kinds of immediate issues that sometimes cause inconvenience to us-but he was interested in going to the heart of the real issues. The real issues have everything to do with relationships and caring for each other. They have everything to do with giving life to each other, and living in the truth. With this extraordinary power Jesus possessed, it is clear from his ministry that he wanted to give this healing power to others. He didn't want to be the focus of all the work. He didn't want to be the one to take care of every situation. In fact, many times Jesus would start the work in a city and when the need rose to fever pitch, he would walk away. He would say, "I'm leaving. I'm going to another city." We might say, "How could Jesus leave those people after he had awakened in them a longing for this kind of healing?"

Jesus came into the world not for a very short period of time and then leaving, but rather he came to teach people how to do what he was doing for a very long period in this world. Jesus was interested in creating people like him, who could do what he did. There's a

wonderful phrase in the Scriptures when Jesus is speaking to his disciples, saying, "You can do everything I am doing. You can even do more than I am doing. You can do greater things." Jesus was healing people, raising them from the dead, and doing many other extraordinary things. He had incredible power, and it is amazing to realize that Jesus is saying, "You have this same power within you." We know that Jesus is talking about divinity that dwelt in him also dwelling in us. We need to trust and believe in that power within us. In the gospel, Jesus looks at his disciples and realizes they have moved toward the process he wants them to be engaged in. They are beginning to see that they are called to be like Jesus. They are called to continue Jesus' ministry in a unique way. Jesus makes a statement of truth. He describes what he sees them to be. He says, "You know, you are really the salt of the earth. And you are the light to this world." Let's look at those two images, because they are very important.

Salt, in the time of Jesus, was a very important preservative. There was such a thing as "bad" salt, salt that had lost its flavor. It is obviously of no value, and is of no good except to be trampled underfoot. Jesus is saying, "You are true salt. You are real salt. Your salt is what is going to preserve things, hold things together." In the rituals of the temple, there was the custom of always placing salt on an animal that was being sacrificed to God. That custom was not in effect because God liked salty meat. It was, rather, a symbol of the covenant relationship between God and his people. This animal sacrifice would preserve or stand as a symbol of living in a covenant relationship with God. It indicated a committed relationship that was absolutely essential. A covenant relationship with God is essential, but we must also have a covenant relationship with those we live and work with-that we try to instill the kingdom into. What is a covenant relationship? It is a relationship that is considered unbreakable. It is a commitment forever. But the real difference between a covenant and a contract is that a covenant is a free-will offering of oneself to the other for the purpose of a particular goal. It depends on the mutuality of these two people.

A covenant relationship demands that two people be equally committed to each other. When we think about this, we can see how in relationships and in any work we do for the kingdom it's probably never going to work without a covenant relationship. The next statement, "You are the light of the world," means that if we are in relationship with God and he is going to be light to us and we will be light to others, it is the way Jesus describes it. If you have a lamp in a room, you don't take it and put it under the bed. A lamp is to be put on a stand where it gives light to everyone around it. What Jesus is trying to say is that his relationship with us is one in which he reveals, fundamentally, who he is. He will reveal who we are-and what the world really is. Then, we are free to move about the world and do the work we have been called to do. We can see what is good. We can see what is bad. The role of light that Jesus has in our lives and that we have in the lives of others is simply to put people in touch with the truth. Have you ever tried to do that? Have you ever sat down and had someone really tell you the truth about things going on in your relationship or about things that are really not as healthy as you wish they might be? It's a very difficult work.

One of the things that happens when someone reveals the truth is that initially it feels very threatening. It feels like a lack of support. What often happens in a relationship like that is the person being shown the truth walks away. That happened all the time with Jesus. He would go to the religious leaders and try to make them aware of what they were doing that wasn't founded in the tradition-and they wanted to kill him. They couldn't stand being exposed to the light. Jesus would say all of the time that sin is about living in darkness.

Sin is about choices made in the dark. Think about this. If we had to move around and do everything in our homes or offices without any light to help us, it would be almost impossible to do anything. We would probably end up standing very still. It's interesting that when we talk about the real work of becoming a partner with God and bringing life to the world, helping God save the world, we can see how hard it would be to do this if we were unable to see what is going on. People would tend to be still, quiet, pulled in. People would be preoccupied with things that are really not important, things that they could simply deal with in their heads because they wouldn't know how to move around in this kind of darkness.

A lot of times we have the feeling of not knowing in which direction we should move. Called to be a spiritual leader in my own family or in my own situation-how do I do it? I don't know how to bring people into the light. Jesus is there to say, "I want to be light to you-and then you need to be light to each other." The only way this will work is if we are in a covenant relationship, and we decide that we will not walk away. In relationships, when we are doing the real, spiritual work or even the work of human beings growing up together, developing and changing-it's impossible to do this unless there is a commitment. Otherwise, we evaluate the relationship and its value in terms of what is going on at that moment. It is all about performance. We have to watch the performance. If the performance, in the eyes of another person, is perceived as not helping them, then they tend to think they want to get out of the relationship. Certainly, not all relationships are covenant relationships. But it seems to me that if we are going to be involved in this world, in this kingdom, certain covenant relationships are essential to our spiritual growth. The most essential relationship, the one we cannot do without, is the relationship with God. This means we make a relationship with God to work with him-and he makes a commitment to work with us. Neither one will let something the other does destroy the relationship.

Let's look at the reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah, which provides a wonderful list of the things we are called to do in this kingdom. I love the way it describes the most obvious things. God is talking to the prophet Isaiah. God tells Isaiah that what he wants us to do for our brothers and sisters is to share our bread, to shelter the oppressed and the homeless, and to clothe the naked. That's food, shelter, and clothing. Our responsibility in a covenant relationship is to make sure people have food, shelter, and clothing. If we take that too literally, it becomes an almost impossible task. If we take it more symbolically, the way I believe it is meant, it means that in our relationships we are supposed to provide clothing, food, and shelter. Clothing means that we keep others warm in the relationship. Food means that we nourish others. Shelter means that we protect them from forces outside that could harm them. The most obvious element in a relationship that works is that there is some nurturing, some protecting, some sense of being cared for. This is exactly what God longs to do for us. God longs to create a kingdom for us, which is our place, our shelter. It is an environment where we are nurtured by a Spirit that gives us energy and strength to do this work. We are given all we need in terms of warmth and protection.

Isaiah says that if we are able to do this, then our light breaks forth like the dawn. The gloom goes away. When real care is there for another person, when a community is filled with care for one member to another, when a minister is filled with care for those he is shepherding, that's the light. That's what takes away gloom, darkness, and depression. When we are in an environment where we feel we really matter and that someone is there to help us, the darkness is lifted away. Sometimes that light can be so searing and so harsh

it is like stepping out of movie theater on a July afternoon. We walk out onto the parking lot and the sunlight is so harsh, we can't handle it. We know it's a difficult thing, but that's where commitment and covenant relationship are so important. The list goes on about living in the light. We then create a place where there is no oppression. There is no malicious speech. I love that image because it seems that talk can be so harmful when we say things we don't really mean. When we say things that don't really reflect where we are, that kind of crazy talk can be malicious speech in covenant relationships. We have to be honest. We have to say what is. We have to tell the truth.

In the reading from Paul to the Corinthians, we are invited to imagine how these gifts work. How is it that someone has the ability to stay with something and to be a source of light to someone? How can we live in the truth with staying power? How do we maintain a hunger for the truth? Paul says there is only one way to do this. He says he is not going to try to convince us with any kind of logic. He is not going to try to make it sound like it all makes sense. He wants us to realize there is only one way this all works. He says we have to open ourselves to this extraordinary power. We surrender to this power-what he calls the demonstration of Spirit and power. He gives all the credit (and he has the right to do that!) to the Spirit. Paul was going around arresting Christians and imprisoning them-even mass-murdering them-and he thought he was doing the right thing. Paul was in the dark. Remember how Paul was knocked off of his horse and the light was so intense that it blinded him for a long time? It was so hard for Paul to look at the truth of what he was really doing. Paul thought he was doing what God wanted. What Paul was doing was persecuting God incarnate. What a powerful image of light and darkness!

Paul talks about what it takes to make this kind of change. He describes where the strength comes from to be committed to a work and to be connected to it, to want to bring people into the truth. He says this ability comes from the convincing power of the Spirit. This does not rest on any kind of wisdom from human beings. Paul says that when he comes into a group of people, he is coming in with all of his weaknesses. He doesn't know how to do the work exactly, and he doesn't know where he is going next. Paul says he will know which way to go when he sees it. Paul is in a very liminal place where he is never quite sure of what to do until he is told. This is a powerful place to be if we are open to the Spirit. Paul uses an image I would like to conclude with: The image of Christ crucified. When we think of Christ crucified, there are all kinds of ways of imagining why Paul is saying this is the only thing that makes any real sense to this tradition he invites people into. It's because this image of Christ crucified has everything to do with surrender. The crucifixion was Jesus surrendering to something he normally would not have wanted to do. He did it because of the covenant relationship he had with the Father. He did it because he thought it would teach and bring people into the truth. He embraced a self-sacrificing mode to enable a process that would bring life to the world. It's an extraordinary place for the human spirit to be-crucifixion. It's the heart of the message of Jesus, that we would be able to crucify our will to something greater than our own narrow and self-centered need. We conclude these Sundays of Ordinary Time with a focus on the incredible ministry Jesus invites us to participate in. Next Sunday, we begin the season of Lent, which invites us into the discipline of what it means to share in the mystery of this crucified Christ.

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Not Hide Yourself from Your Own Flesh

By [Rev. Walter J. Burghardt, SJ](#)

Today I find Jesus and Isaiah challenging. Uncomfortably challenging. Both are strong, blunt, uncompromising. Each tells me something I really would rather not hear. Jesus, because he tells me what I should *be* and usually am not; Isaiah, because he tells me what I should *do* and usually don't. Let me describe my discomfort through three stages. I shall move from (1) a bit of Jewish history to (2) a sense of Christian mystery to (3) a bitter dose of 20th-century realism.

I

First, a bit of history—two domestic items from early Israel.¹ Why did Jesus choose these two metaphors, salt and light? Because in Palestine each item would have caught an Israelite's eye like an imaginative commercial. As if I were to flash on your TV screen a Hefty Trash Bag from Jonathan Winters or a Double Blush from Estee Lauder—obviously indispensable for human living. In Palestine salt was a must, irreplaceable. As with "water and fire and iron," Sirach proclaims, salt "is basic" to our needs (Sir 39:26). Not yet for margaritas, but to improve the taste, say, of meat and fish. "Can that which is tasteless," Job asked amid his ashes, "be eaten without salt?" (Job 6:6). Even more importantly, to simply preserve your food. A small thing indeed, a pinch of salt, compared to the meat and fish, even to the vegetables—yet incomparably important. Salt changed what it touched, kept it from spoiling, rotting, corrupting; salt even purified. That is why, in Old Testament times, salt was used to season every sacrifice. "With all your offerings," God told His people through Moses, "you shall offer salt" (Lev 2:13).

And what can I say of the light? In the one-room cottage of the Oriental peasant, the small dish-like devices in which oil was burned were essential. Not a particularly bright light; hardly our 3-way Sylvania; but without it life would have been dark indeed. I could not have seen you once the sun went down, could not have read the Torah, could not have walked with sure foot and light heart. So much of life would have stopped at dusk-like the evening in Manhattan in the 60s, when I watched all the lights of the city gradually go out, and millions of men and women sat in darkness or by candlelight, afraid to move.

II

All well and good—a neat footnote to ancient history. But the Jesus of today's Gospel is not playing the historian, reminding you how fortunate you are with a "frig" for your cold cuts and PEPCO for your light bulbs. He is making an astounding affirmation—directly to his first followers, indirectly to every disciple since he came down from the Mount: "You are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world" (Mt 5:13, 14). Me? Are you being serious, Lord? Or is this one of your deliberate exaggerations, like "If you don't hate your father and mother, your kid sister and big brother, you cannot be a disciple of mine"? Or, "If you have faith the size of a tiny mustard seed, you can face up to Mount Everest and tell it to 'get lost' "?

Sorry, good friends, no hyperbole here. Imagination indeed, but not fantasy. You *are* the salt of the earth. Jesus is insisting that, for its moral well-being, for its ethical good, this world depends in large measure on the Christian disciple. Not simply apostles like Andrew and Peter, fervent followers like Mary of Nazareth and Mary of Magdala. Not

just Francis of Assisi and Francis Xavier; not just Teresa of Avila, Thérèse of Lisieux, Mother Teresa of Calcutta. No. For genuine human existence, if we are ever to move from war to peace, from starvation to satiety, from hating to loving, this earth of ours rests on your shoulders and mine.

Oh, not on our shoulders alone; not simply on Christians. Shiites and Sunnites, South African blacks and whites, believers and unbelievers alike, all who are alive, are involved here. And still, you and I have a clear call from Christ. Not a gentle suggestion; a loud trumpet sound. We may seem small in our own eyes, insignificant; we cannot claim the power of a Khomeini or a Qaddafi, a Tutu or a Thatcher. Nevertheless, our task, like salt, is to improve the quality of human living, change what we touch, preserve from devastation this God-shaped, dreadfully scarred earth, this paradox of beauty and the beast. If we disciples turn flat, lifeless, tasteless, if like salt from the Dead Sea we give off a stale, acrid, alkaline taste, some of our sisters and brothers will suffer, spoil, corrupt—will starve for bread or justice or love. And we? Listen not to me but to the harsh judgment of Jesus: You will be worthless, useless, fit for the garbage heap, deserve to be thrown into the street with the rest of the rubbish.

And you *are* the light of the world. Meaning what? Jesus is insisting that we who believe he is Savior of humankind, we who have risen with him and live in his presence, we who eat his flesh and drink his blood, have no right to hide our gifts in a sort of flour bin, have no right to clutch them in hot little hands for ourselves or our groupies. The gifts we have—of nature and grace—should stand out, shine like neon lights or glow lamps, should make people pause, force them to stop and look and listen. Our faith should lend fidelity to the faithless, our hope raise the hopeless from the gutter, our love assuage the cancer of hate that rages through all too many hearts. Why? Not to make others like us, admire us, envy us. In Jesus' words, that those who cross our path may "give praise to [our] heavenly Father" (Mt 5:16), that in His human images *God* may be glorified.

Here, in four Gospel verses, is what I dare to call your "Christian mystery." Mystery in the sense that a tremendous truth hidden in God has been disclosed to you by His very own Son. Your task as Christians is not to mimic the culture that encompasses you. Your task, like mine, is to furnish a fresh flavor to the world you walk, to shine like Bethlehem's star for such as are searching—searching for something, for someone, to make life more human, to make each day worth waking up to.

III

Hard to argue with that—but perhaps because it's so terribly vague. How do you move from metaphor and mystery to 20th-century realism? How do you get the salt out of the cellar, how shine your light so that men and women can be dazzled by the Christ glowing within you? Isaiah 58 thunders one way. Not the only way, but a way that is as imperative in 1987 as it was five centuries before Christ was born. Listen once again to the Old Testament prophet² as he challenges the first Jews returning to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon. But as you listen, don't picture these returnees as a group of slaphappy hostages coming back to a homeland high in hope and bursting with joy. What met the exiles' eyes was a Jerusalem desperately in need of reform. The temple, center of Sion, was far from finished, and foreign gods mocked Yahweh. The law had to be reestablished, the Sabbath restored. The leaders had to be purified, the faithless among the people refashioned to fidelity. Exiles embittered by Babylon had somehow to be reconciled with fellow Jews who had never known banishment.³ In this context, where so much was needed, from

physical labor to radical reconversion, the prophet hits hard at a practice dear to the Lord and His people:

Fasting like yours this day
will not make your voice to be heard on high.
Is such the fast that I choose,
a clay for a man to humble himself?
Is it to bow down his head like a rush,
and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him?
Will you call this a fast,
and a day acceptable to the Lord?
Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of wickedness,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover him,
and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?
Then shall your light break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up speedily;
your righteousness shall go before you,
the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.
Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;
you shall cry, and he will say, Here I am.
If you take away from the midst of you the yoke,
the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness,
if you pour yourself out for the hungry
and satisfy the desire of the afflicted,
then shall your light rise in the darkness
and your gloom be as the noonday.
(Isa 58:4b—10)

Are you surprised that, in God's sight, this is when "*your* light shall break forth like the dawn" (v. 8), this when "*your* light shall rise in the darkness" (v. 10)? It shouldn't surprise you. It was in such Isaian syllables that Jesus summed up his own mission in the Nazareth synagogue: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed" (Lk 4:18; cf. Isa 61:1—2).

You see, whether it's Jewish exiles returning to Jerusalem, or Jesus returning to Nazareth, or you returning from this serene sanctuary to your hopped-up or downbeat scene, the Lord has some of His troubled people waiting. Waiting for exiled relatives or fellow Nazarene, good reason indeed. But why should an acre of God's world be waiting for *you*? Because, like the exiles from Babylon and Jesus of Nazareth, you are uncommonly gifted. Not that all of you have "the smarts," have power to manipulate people like pawns, rate a "10" for sexuality. St. Paul had to remind the Christians of Corinth: "Not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth" (1 Cor 1:26). To *all* of them—foolish to the world and weak, low and despised—he made one poignant point: "Consider your calling."

Yes, my sisters and brothers, consider your calling. You are graced with what Paul called "the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Gal 5:22—23). But not simply for yourselves—to contentedly contemplate your spiritual navel with a Bud Light. You leave here to hook up with as many oppressions as ever Isaiah and even Jesus conceived, a campus or city where Paul's nine fruits of the Spirit clash constantly with nine fruits of Satan: love with hate, joy with bitterness, peace with war, patience with intolerance, kindness with cruelty, goodness with evil, faithfulness with infidelity, gentleness with savagery, self-control with unbridled license.

I cannot pronounce to any single one of you precisely what fruit of the Spirit you ought to plant, precisely where, precisely how. A session with Jesus will be far more fruitful than a bout with Burghardt. And I assure you, word of honor, Hoyas past and present, Holy Trinity and Dahlgren, amaze me, thrill me, humble me with the oppressions you oppose, from exiled children through battered women to men without work or bread or dignity. I dare make but three suggestions, from seven decades of people-watching and a frank examination of my own conscience.

First, despite all we actually do, many of us can do more; and unless we do much more, our Christianity will be tasteless, our world continue to corrupt, many salted Christians fit only for the rubbish heap. Second, while lighting the world with wonderfully visible beams—So Others May Eat, Bread for the City, Sarah House, Mother Teresa's hospice for AIDS—look more closely, more lovingly, into the eyes you meet each day. Oppression is not in exile from our pews and our dorms, is not confined to 14th and U. The oppressed rub shoulders with us. Third, I am not suggesting that you should "loose the bonds of wickedness, break every yoke" (Isa 58:6) because you are utterly free yourselves, unoppressed, filled to the brim with the fruits of the Spirit. No, you are still wonderfully and fearfully human; and so your own flesh and spirit will be burdened with yokes at times barely bearable. But this, strangely, can be all to the good; in fact, it seems indispensable for "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world." For, as the exiles from Babylon and the Christ of Calvary both reveal, the most effective servant is the suffering servant, the servant whose experience makes for compassion, the servant who "suffers with." It is especially "then" that "you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry, and he will say 'Here I am' " (Isa 58:9).

From *Lovely in Eyes Not His* © 1988 Paulist Press.