

From Fr. David



A reflection from Fr. Thomas Rosica, CSB

Jesus of Nazareth was a master teacher and a great storyteller. I can easily picture him teaching and preaching to his young friends as they sat on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, on hillsides, in deserted places or in the temple precincts in Jerusalem. He incorporated everything around him in his teaching and preaching and he models for us a tremendous artistry of the human condition and of God's created world. These qualities of Jesus are clearly evident in today's Gospel- the continuation of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel [5:13-16]. In order to explain the rich meaning of today's Gospel passage, I would like to draw from two personal experiences that brought them to life for me – one from my years of study in the Holy Land and the second from an earlier experience studying art history in France.



Understanding salt of the earth

In the ancient biblical world, salt was a precious commodity. It gave flavor and zest to food; it served as an important preservative; salt also made people thirst for something more. Jesus wanted his disciples to give flavor and zest to the world through his teaching; to preserve the truth as he proclaimed it to the world; to make the world thirst for more.

During my studies at the Ecole Biblique in Jerusalem, I recall vividly the rather perilous journey from Jerusalem to Nablus (biblical Shechem) to visit Jacob's well. Along the winding road, I remember our Palestinian taxi driver, Ali, pointing out to us the clay ovens next to many Palestinian houses. Ali told us how many of the locals still prefer these ovens to their own electric or propane gas stoves. These types of ovens have been around since ancient times– in fact, in the biblical times, each village had its communal oven. We stopped to visit several families who ran their “bakeries” on the side of the road, and tasted the warm pita breads freshly baked in the clay ovens.

In the ancient Aramaic and Hebrew languages spoken by Jesus, one word meant both "clay-oven" and "earth". Instead of using wood to fuel the fire, the young people of the village would gather camel or donkey dung, mix it with salt, form it into patties and let it dry in the hot Middle Eastern sun. To this day in many parts of the world, these dung patties are still used as fuel for the fire. A slab of salt was placed at the base of the oven and the salted dung patty was laid upon it. Salt has catalytic properties which cause the dung to burn. After a certain time, the salt slab

loses its catalytic ability and it becomes useless. I saw these patties with my very eyes, strewn out to dry on several rooftops and walls along the road to Nablus. I learned that day what Jesus was referring to when he says: "It [salt] is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot [5:13].

In the ancient biblical world, salt was one of the most important necessities of life. Salt was used to preserve as well as to season food. In addition to its use with food, salt was strewn on sacrifices— both cereal offerings and burnt offerings. It was used for making covenants and representing commitment: "You shall not omit from your grain offerings the salt of the covenant with your God; with all your offerings you shall offer salt" [Lev. 2:13].

The Old Testament also speaks of 'covenant of salt': "All the holy offerings that the Israelites present to the LORD I have given to you, together with your sons and daughters, as a perpetual due; it is a covenant of salt forever before the LORD for you and your descendants as well" [Num. 18:19]. 'Covenant of salt' means a permanent relationship; eating salt with someone meant to be bound in loyalty. This is what the evangelist Mark refers to when he writes: "Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another" [Mark 9:50]. Salt was also used to rub a newborn child, either for medicinal or other purposes, such as the desire to save the child from demonic forces.

When salt loses its flavor

The concern that "salt has lost its flavor" is difficult for us to understand today, especially because of the purity of the salt we use. In the time of Jesus, salt was not purified in the way that we know but was collected from deposits left by the Dead Sea as it dried. This salt was exposed to the elements and could break apart and lose its flavor. Such salt is a very appropriate metaphor for discipleship, which can and does lose its vigor over time if care is not taken to keep it alive.

When Jesus calls his disciples "salt of the earth", he is alluding to many of the dimensions of salt described above. Disciples are those who can season what is tasteless, preserve what could deteriorate and express mutual covenant and loyalty. Disciples of Jesus are those who speak well: "Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone [Col. 4:6]. To be salt for the earth-oven is to have that fire within- to set things on fire around us, to keep the light burning brightly. If we do this as his disciples, we, too, will also be "light of the world". Here we see how the two images of salt and light are masterfully joined together. Jesus reveals himself to be a clever and imaginative teacher, one who gave flavor, zest, life and light to those around him.

Color and light

In addition to being salt for the earth, Jesus called his followers to be the light of the world. In the memorable sermon on the Galilean hillside, Jesus transfers his light to those who follow him: "You are the light of the world." Jesus is the light of the world. Jesus calls us to be that same light.

During my summer undergraduate studies in France in the late seventies, I remember an art history course that took us to the very picturesque medieval town of Moret-sur-Loing in the



Département of Seine-et-Marne, not far from the cities of Paris and Sens. This beautiful little town was a source of inspiration for the great French artists Manet, Monet, Renoir, Cézanne, Sisley and Degas. Who is not moved by the breathtaking beauty of a Monet or Manet painting, as we admire how light can capture and change the way we look at the scenery and indeed the world around us?

Those memorable summer lectures and my visit to Moret-sur-Loing as a young university student would be my introduction to impressionist paintings. I can still recall the elderly, very French art historian lecturing to us in Molière's language as we sat along the banks of the river flowing through the town: "Remember that impressionism is all about color and light. Its external appearance uses light to bring out the color, to give it life."

Light has the characteristic of dispelling darkness, of warming all it reaches, of exalting forms. All this is done with the greatest speed. Being the light of the world means for Christians, spreading everywhere the light that comes from on high. It means fighting darkness due to evil and sin and often caused by ignorance, prejudice and selfishness. The more we look on the face of Jesus, like an impressionist painting, the more light we see and the more we are transfigured by it.



Your light shall break forth like the dawn

The reading from the prophet Isaiah [58:7-10] reminds us that merely external worship does not avail with God; it must be joined to internal sincerity. Isaiah tells us the kind of fast that the Lord expects from us. He encourages his listeners to 'do away with the yoke, the clenched fist, the wicked word', and to do it by 'sharing your bread with the hungry and clothing the

man you see to be naked'. When you do these things, then "light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday."

There may be many reasons why, at times, we choose the way of the clenched fist rather than the open hand: hurt and disappointment, tiredness and indifference, fear and misunderstanding, selfishness and disdain. Whatever the reasons, the clenched fist always involves turning from our own kin and denying, in effect, that others are of the same kin. The open hand, however, means turning towards others as our kin, fellow human beings, brothers and sisters, children of the same heavenly Father sharing a common call to become the people of the Beatitudes.

By their deeds the disciples are to influence the world for good. They can no more escape notice than a city set on a mountain. If they fail in good works, they are as useless as flavorless salt or as a lamp whose light is concealed. By inviting us to be "light," Jesus invites us to make him present in the world. Just as the presence of salt and light cannot be hidden and their absence will be noticed, the kindness of the good person cannot be denied. The good works of the open-handed shine forth so that people might praise the Father for the holiness they glimpse in His creatures.