

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

'You are the salt of the earth.'

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In the earliest days of the Church, when someone was baptized, they would be fed salt. Even during the Reformation, Luther attempted to retain this practice, but over time, it fell out of use. This is partly because, by his time, very few people understood what salt represented.

Let us not be counted among them, for today we hear that we *are the salt of the world*, a strange saying indeed, at least to us. What does it exactly mean to be *salt*? A mystery awaits us in this humble seasoning, a mystery that now indwells us.

To understand the symbol of salt, one must understand the origin of salt, and the use of salt. St. Hilary of Poitiers writes perhaps surprisingly to us that salt comes from the union of fire and water. A strange argument to make if one thinks of salt as primarily coming from a mine, and being composed, as the chemists would say, of the bonding of an acid and a base.

Yet in ancient times, salt did not come from a mine. It came from the sea. And when sea water was put over fire, it would evaporate, leaving salt.

Water, a symbol of creation, for out of the primeval waters did God summon forth all the world; fire, a symbol of the Holy Spirit, for *the Holy Spirit dwelt upon them like tongues of fire*.

To be salt is to the union of God's temporal creation and God's eternal being. For the temporal being made eternal, the mortal being made immortal, is what is of importance here.

Hence the importance of the use of salt. We tend to think that salt is useful to

flavor food. The ancients understood something more basic: salt preserves that which would otherwise decay. Salt both represents and confers incorruptibility upon corruptible flesh.

Thus, it is easy to understand what our Lord means when He speaks, saying *'if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet.'* Indeed, He is simply saying *'if that which is immortal surrenders its immortality, what can it do, but die, and decay into the earth, to be tread upon evermore.'*

Our Lord continues: *'You are the light of the world.'* *'Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.'* For having become salt, how could we not also be light, for salt is but fire? And taking in the fire of the Holy Spirit, how can we not do good works? Who shall drive out the Spirit and His will? Who shall darken a light *beneath a basket?*

Now you have become *a city*, for see you not what Christ is describing of us? Nothing else but what we began with, that is, the sacrament of baptism. From the waters we are reborn. By the will of God we receive the fire of the Holy Spirit. And, being united with Christ as one Church through baptism, we have become a city, the heavenly Jerusalem, eternal and golden. Jerusalem, the city of the Temple of the Lord. *'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those that are sent to her.'*

'Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them, but to fulfill them. For truly, I say unto you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one jot or tittle will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.'

There is a Law that must be fulfilled; a law that demands a righteous man, and a spotless sacrifice, offered upon the holy hill of the city of God.

Last week, we beheld that righteous man, that spotless sacrifice. Now behold the holy hill, the city of the Lord. Behold the Church, behold this house of prayer, behold every Christian altar, behold every Christian heart. In this city shall the Lord of Glory be crucified; child of Adam, were you not there, when the mob cried out in tumult that the Lord be killed? *'You are a city on a hill.'* And the inhabitants of this city shall *crucify the Lord of Glory*, that the *glory of the Lord might descend upon this city*, even as He Himself said, *'Father, forgive them.'*

'Lift up your heads, O gates! Be lifted up O ancient doors, that the Lord of Glory may come.' Open the gateway of your heart, that the sacrifice might be rightly offered in that holy city.

Then, *'you will know nothing but Christ, and Him crucified.'*

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Preached by Pastor Fields

Sermon Texts: Isaiah 58:3-9; 1 Corinthians 2:1-12; Mathew 5:13-20.