

Fr. Tim Clancy

Feb 5th, 2023

Salt of the Earth

We have a tendency to identify the holy with that which is set apart, separate from the profane and the mundane. We have a tendency to identify the holy with the pure, the clean, the innocent. And we feel a need to protect what is holy, as if it's the divine that is fragile and vulnerable rather than ourselves.

In today's Gospel Jesus calls us to be the salt of the earth. Now in light of such assumptions about holiness, the striking thing about salt is that it isn't much good by itself. Imagine trying to swallow a teaspoon of salt. I couldn't do it, and if you could it might kill you for all I know. But add that same teaspoon of salt to a pot of stew and the stew tastes better than ever. In fact without any salt I don't know if I could eat the stew either. So what does Jesus mean by comparing holiness with salt? He is saying that the holy is not to be kept apart, carefully removed from the messiness or the dullness of ordinary life; its to suffuse every aspect of our lives, releasing the flavor inherent within the ten thousand things. Salt by itself can preserve the dead, but it cannot sustain the living. I remember winters in Chicago where salt is thrown around with abandon to melt the ice on streets and sidewalks. Its an act of desperation really, there is just too much snow, and too much traffic to try to cart it all away. But Chicagoans pay for it in dead grass, ruined shoes and, until recently, rusted out cars. Walking the sidewalks of Chicago in winter I was sure I could feel the soles of my shoes dissolving.

In today's first reading, the prophet Isaiah is writing from exile in Babylon. Now one of the traumas of the exile was that people could no longer worship in the temple. In fact the temple had been destroyed by the Babylonians. But without the temple, where was God? In this profane land of their enemies, had they been robbed of all they hold sacred? abandoned by all that is holy? This would have been particularly acute for Isaiah, as he had been a priest of the temple in Jerusalem. Did his life still have any point?

Isaiah prophesies to his people that God can still be found, even far from Jerusalem. For as Jesus and Paul will also claim five hundred years later, God dwells not only in the temple but in his holy people and we can find the sacred by holding one another sacred.

In the Gospels, the priests are not allies of Jesus, they are his enemies. For Jesus preached against their isolation of the sacred from the life of ordinary people. In the name of cultic purity the priests taught that the holy must be protected from the tainted, the pure kept apart from the defiled, the righteous from the sinner, the priest from the people. Its why I don't wear clerics unless I have to. I treat it as my tuxedo to be worn only on formal occasions when everyone dresses up.

Jesus heralded a new Israel, an anti-Israel one might say, an Israel of the sick and the sinner, the outcast and the outsider. Jesus deliberately drew his followers from the ranks of the ritually impure,

sinners and tax-collectors, beggars and prostitutes, the sick and the possessed. In fact, having been conceived out of wedlock, Jesus himself would have been thought to have been ritually impure by his family and neighbors, all those who did not receive a re-assuring visit from an angel.. His point was not to side with sin or poverty, crime or disease but rather that it is those who suffer or even perpetrate such evils who are most in need of God=s redeeming word and healing touch. And unlike many of us, much of the time, they know it. They can hardly forget it, for they are reminded of it every time they open their eyes.

And what applies to us in our relationship with our neighbor also applies to us in our relationship to ourselves. Jesus does not call for us to set apart some part of ourselves and keep it sacred and pure, removed and protected from the rest of our lives. Salt hermetically sealed is worthless. It might as well be thrown away for all the good it can do. Rather we are called to use our salt to season the whole stew, every day. We are called to extend what we hold sacred to all parts of our lives, to attend especially to those parts of ourselves where we fall short, where our limitations are only too evident, our neediness only too raw. As with our neighbor in need we are called upon to feed those part of ourselves whose hunger only undermines us, clothe those parts of ourselves whose nakedness only exposes us to shame and ridicule..

Jesus calls us also to be a light to the world, and to bring the Light of Christ into our own darkness, by acknowledging the ambiguity and ambivalence that haunts our own lives, to thereby discern the light of Christ, however dim in our own dark corners, shadowed by our fears, driven by our cravings, or riven by our shame and rage. If we strive to release the oppressed, feed the hungry, console the afflicted, both without and within, then Christ our Light, shall indeed shine forth and our gloom shall become like midday. Like Paul, our weakness can itself become a revelation of God=s strength. Our fear the stage on which God=s love plays out.

May we have eyes that can peer into the dark and discern God=s light shining through, that we may ourselves may ourselves salt for the earth and a light to the world.