

5th Sunday Ordinary time, A

There was a day in the life of the Church when it suffered severe persecution at the hands of the world. The New Testament, especially the Book of Acts, tells stories of unbelievable suffering which those early Christians endured because of their faith in Christ. For some reason, the first-century world looked upon the Church as an adversary, an enemy to be destroyed. And that pattern of persecution did not end with the first century. Read the story of Church history across the years, and you will find that its pages are periodically stained by the blood of martyrs.

In some places, it is still happening today. But I suspect most of us here today have difficulty relating to these stories of persecution. We find it hard to believe that people are actually punished and even put to death because of their faith in Christ. This has never been the nature of our relationship to the world, and hopefully it never will be.

But what the world so often does to us is perhaps even worse. Instead of attacking us as an enemy, it ignores us as an irrelevancy. Many people look upon the modern church as a peculiar but harmless tradition that has little or nothing to do with life. One modern writer, observing a group of Christians gathering for worship, explained it like this:

“They do it every Sunday.

They will be all right on Monday;

It’s just a little habit they have acquired.”

Well, I am not suggesting that you and I should go out and provoke the world until it becomes willing to persecute us. I am simply saying that a Christianity which the world can pass by and never even notice is not the Christianity of the New Testament.

In today's gospel reading Jesus called his disciples "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world." Salt is not easily ignored. Leave it out of your food, and you are going to miss it, at least for a while. Use too much of it, and you will notice that as well. Salt is a positive, active influence, not easily ignored. The same thing can be said of light. It is not easily overlooked unless it is deliberately hidden. Have you ever flown in an airplane at night over a sparsely populated region? All around and underneath you is one great sea of darkness; but once in a while, you will see a little speck of light. It may be nothing more than one lighted window in a ranch house; but it is visible for miles, and you could hardly miss it.

Jesus was talking to his disciples about a kind of religion which the world cannot ignore. And you and I should be curious to know what kind of religion that might be, because we quite clearly need more of it.

For one thing, it is certainly a distinctive religion. Like a burning lamp in a sea of darkness, it does not blend in.

Jesus was telling his disciples to stand apart, to be different, that there should be as much distinction between them and the world as there is between light and darkness.

And here perhaps is the first clue to our problem. It could be that the world ignores us as an irrelevancy because it never really sees us. We have become so much like everything around us that we just blend into the landscape. We have no distinct identity. There is nothing really different about us. Maybe we are like the salt, which Jesus had described, that had gone flat and lost its flavor, or like the lamp which had been placed under a bushel basket.

Well, I don't know if flavor can be restored to salt, but I do know that lamps can be taken out from under baskets and put on stands. If there is one thing we Christians ought to be, it is noticeable. Not because we look strange or act stilly, but because we live differently. In a world that is motivated by greed, a generous man is going to be noticed. In a world that is consumed by hatred, a person of goodwill is hard to overlook.

That is what Jesus meant when he said, "a city set on a hill cannot be hidden." His church is to be different, distinctive, standing out from the landscape like a luminous city in the middle of the night.

It also seems to me that Jesus was saying that his followers should be noted and noticed for their radiant life. They should be a happy and joyful people.

Certainly, Jesus was that. In fact, he was so radiant; he found so much joy in life that some people resented it. They doubted his sincerity, because they found it hard to believe a religious man could be that

happy. Think of that – Our Lord was noted and sometimes criticized for his happiness.

There is something utterly inconsistent about a sour Christian. And you can be certain of this: the world will pay little attention to long-faced religion and will seldom if ever be attracted to it.

Finally, I think Jesus was talking about a kind of religion that makes people strong. Light is strong; darkness can never overcome it.

Brothers and Sisters, we live in world that is in trouble. People's hearts are failing them from fear. There is economic uncertainty. There are diminishing natural resources. We seem to be running out of clean air and water and sufficient food and there are all kinds of personal problems such as disease and death.

In that kind of world, if there is something that can make people strong and give them hope, then everybody has got to be interested. And I submit to you that our faith is that something. Christianity is at home in the midst of trouble. It was born there. Its symbol is a cross. When the night is at its darkness the Church should stand out at its radiant best.

If we are true to the principles of our Lord, there will be times when the world will hate us; but it can never ignore us. And there will be those within the world who will be drawn to us. Jesus said it like this. "Your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father."