

**Reflection on the Gospel-Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A
(Matthew 5:13-16)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

In today's gospel, Jesus addresses two short parables to his disciples in the presence of the crowds. The crowds as well as the disciples hear what he has to say. Parables were intended to tease their hearers, inviting them to see things differently or from a new perspective, to see themselves in a new light. One of the difficulties for us is that Jesus told these parables in early first century Palestine with its particular symbol system, while we hear them through the multiple layers of our own twenty-first century contexts and symbol systems. "Salt" and "light" have slightly different resonances in different contexts, as do "earth" and "world". Exploring those resonances or nuances can bring us to a deeper appreciation of the text.

This short reflection allows for a focus only on "the salt of the earth" parable or metaphor. For Jesus' Palestinian audience, salt was used to preserve and season food. It also functioned as a cleansing or purifying agent. It could only lose its savour if contaminated by additives. We can resonate with all of that. For some of the Jewish rabbis, salt signified wisdom: a "salted" disciple was a "wise" disciple. In some parts of the ancient world, as in Pakistan today, salt was used in dyeing processes as a way of intensifying as well as preserving the colour of fabrics. Many Westerners are not aware of this practice. Farmers today are rightly concerned about high levels of salinity in overworked soil. That was certainly not the case for first-century Palestinians.

When we declare someone to be "the salt of the earth", we are generally referring to the sheer goodness of the person in question, her/his down-to-earth reliability, lack of pretentiousness and practical wisdom. To be salt of the earth is to season the earth community, to intensify its beauty, to be wise in one's judgments and just in all one's dealings. This parable, with its multi-layered symbolism, certainly teases the mind.

In the original Greek, the emphasis is on the first word in the sentence. Jesus is telling his hearers, disciples and crowds, that *they* are the salt of the earth. They do not have to *become* the salt of the earth; they *are* the salt of the earth. In short, he is affirming their worth. In its literary context, that assertion contrasts Jesus' followers with those who might persecute them. It affirms their capacity to stand strong in the face of opposition, "for the sake of justice". If they allow themselves to be overwhelmed or their commitment to be shaken, then the "salt" will be contaminated and the "earth" cannot be seasoned. As we reflect on the diverse metaphorical applications of salt and earth, we might take a moment to give thanks to God for the gift of the material realities that underlie these metaphors.