

If I were to offer you a packet of peanuts, how many of you would prefer plain rather than salted? And how many of you would prefer salted? Now imagine that the salt had lost its taste – the salted ones would be slightly gritty; I think I'd rather have the plain.

And Jesus says that we are the ones who make the difference. We are the ones who put the saltiness in the flavor and make the world a tastier place. You never want too much salt – but Jesus doesn't seem to be concerned about that – his concern is that we might lose our zest and become bland and tasteless.

So what is it that makes us salty?

It is our faith and our vision as we live them out in the path of Jesus. We are the resurrection people, the ones who have come to know and believe that God brings resurrection out of death and failure; the ones who know that all things however painful or terrible will be resolved in Christ; the ones who work in cooperation with the spirit of God for social justice and the flourishing of the planet. We are the ones who are called to forgive, to let go of grudges and anger and to resist evil without resorting to violence.

It's a big calling. It's not an easy one. But it is ours.

It is a calling that we are asked to follow every day. Not just when it's convenient. Not just on Sundays.

I love our worship and prayer times together. From the first reading today, it sounds as though the Jewish people to whom God was speaking through Isaiah also loved their worship. "Day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways," he says, "...they ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God."

But something was going wrong. The people were not experiencing the relationship they expected, "Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?" they asked. And God's

response? “Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. “

It seems that the nation had lost sight of God’s call to justice. They thought that by worshipping God and looking for a personal relationship with Spirit they were fulfilling their calling as the people of God. But they were missing the point. Serving and worshipping God is not just about having great Sunday liturgy. It’s about taking the energy of our connection to God and using that to fuel lives of justice, service and non-violence. It’s about doing the difficult work of living counter-culturally.

In 1630, John Winthrop was a chaplain aboard the Arbella, the flagship of the fleet which brought Puritans to what would become Massachusetts. He preached a famous sermon using the text of today’s Gospel. He said that the settlers would need to live together in community and the way they lived would be seen by others, like a city built upon a hill. John F Kennedy used the same image in 1961, and then in 1980 Ronald Reagan said,

I have quoted John Winthrop's words more than once on the campaign trail this year—for I believe that Americans in 1980 are every bit as committed to that vision of a shining "city on a hill," as were those long ago settlers ...

These visitors to that city on the Potomac do not come as white or black, red or yellow; they are not Jews or Christians; conservatives or liberals; or Democrats or Republicans. They are Americans awed by what has gone before, proud of what for them is still... a shining city on a hill.¹

And in 2006, in his commencement address at the University of Massachusetts Boston, then-U.S. Senator Barack Obama said:

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/City_upon_a_Hill

It was right here, in the waters around us, where the American experiment began. As the earliest settlers arrived on the shores of Boston and Salem and Plymouth, they dreamed of building a City upon a Hill. And the world watched, waiting to see if this improbable idea called America would succeed.

More than half of you represent the very first member of your family to ever attend college. In the most diverse university in all of New England, I look out at a sea of faces that are African-American and Hispanic-American and Asian-American and Arab-American. I see students that have come here from over 100 different countries, believing like those first settlers that they too could find a home in this City on a Hill—that they too could find success in this unlikeliest of places.

As you know, I am an immigrant myself. I didn't come to this country for economic reasons, or because I was unsafe in England. I came, primarily, because I believed that God was calling me here. I was one of the lucky ones, although it was difficult I obtained residency with the help of an expensive attorney.

Others are not so fortunate. It is not easy to immigrate to America. There is a tight quota system and close vetting.

For this country to declare that whole groups of people, without exception, are banned from travelling here is to go against the fundamental principles of our founding. To do it suddenly without consideration of those who have been promised entry or those on their way is deeply unfair.

In the gospel reading, after declaring that we are the salt and the light of the world – a city built on a hill which cannot be hid, Jesus says, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.”

So we don't have the luxury of ignoring Isaiah. We can't think, oh that was then, we don't need to think about that today because we're in a

new dispensation. No. God says through Isaiah,

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly.

That's what it means to be the light of the world; to loose the bonds of injustice. When we see injustice, we the salt of the world, are called, like the prophets, to speak up. The time is now. This is when we need to speak up against every kind of injustice.

It may seem as though no-one is listening but that does not give us the right to sit back and say nothing. This is the time for us to be active and informed citizens. Our representatives need to hear from us. Not once, not twice but again and again.

It is easy to take salad or a casserole to People's Kitchen every couple of months and feel that we are doing our bit. But unless we address the root causes of homelessness and hunger we are just applying a bandaid. It is easy to send a check to an organization that helps refugees, but unless we also address the reasons for the refugee crisis, we are failing to use our prophetic voice.

At the same time as doing all we can to directly ameliorate suffering, we must be addressing the inequalities and lack of fairness in our society. And that means raising our voices.

If we are to be the salt of the world, if we are to be the light of the world, we need to become the prophets of today.