

I am a self-confessed Gilbert and Sullivan addict and since my childhood have been delighted by their comic operas. One of my favourites is HMS Pinafore. Now Little Buttercup was what is called a 'bum-boat woman', that is to say, a person who supplied the officers and crew with little luxuries not included in the ship's bill of fare. Early on in the story she sings a song to the ship's Captain, Captain Cochrane:

Things are seldom what they seem,  
Skim milk masquerades as cream;  
Highlows pass as patent leathers;  
Jackdaws strut in peacock's feathers.'

Black sheep dwell in every fold;  
All that glitters is not gold;  
Storks turn out to be but logs;  
Bulls are but inflated frogs.

Drops the wind and stops the mill;  
Turbot is ambitious brill;  
Gild the penny if you will,  
Yet it is a penny still.

We all know we live in a world where appearances can be deceiving, a world where what is truth is becoming increasingly difficult to work out. What with facts and alt facts, is really difficult to know what to believe and who to trust. We all know how easy it is to jump to conclusions before we gain a deep understanding of situations and circumstances.

We all want authenticity, don't we? We all want the inside to match the outside. Sugar and salt look identical to the eye but they operate differently on the tongue. Which one is which? Only a full tasting will tell us which is which.

In today's Gospel Jesus has a lot to say about salt and the importance of salt being salt and not something else, "You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled underfoot." Now what does that mean?

First, it's important to remember that Jesus is talking to his disciples: it's these people that he is describing as the salt of the earth. That is good and bad news for them, and therefore us, the disciples of today.

We see that Jesus has a vision in mind, a standard that describes what we disciples should be like in the world. We are meant to be the salt of the earth, a sort of leaven or spice for the world. It's interesting that Jesus uses this metaphor of salt.

Salt, in a dish, is not just salty. It is a fundamental flavour which highlights all the others. In a word, we followers of Jesus are meant to as it were to enchant the world, to draw out the flavours of all the world, our whole existence, everything!

Jesus then wants his followers to deeply engage with the world, indeed to act as a spice that enlivens all the rest. With this spice, the world feels things more deeply, the highs are higher, and the lows are lower. With this spice of Jesus' disciples the world feels, thinks, and acts more profoundly.

Note that he makes this point Jesus says that we **are** the salt. The key word here is *are*. He doesn't say, "You will someday be the salt of the earth," or "Continue to work at becoming the salt of the earth," no, "You *are*, the salt of the earth." For Jesus, we disciples are indeed already the salt of the earth. This is a spiritual reality, we are already the salt of the earth, it is a state of being that is already in place. This calls to mind the great saint Evelyn Underhill who said that spirituality is more about reminding and remembering than learning something new. [ 'Do this to remember', because I keep forgetting!] We are this salt of the earth. If you don't believe me, ask Jesus.

So with this reminder that Jesus has a clear idea of what we are to be in the world, this enlivening spice, and that we are indeed that spice, we come face-to-face with the prospect of how we are doing in the light of Jesus' statement. In other words: how are we doing in living with the standard that Jesus has laid out? Are you living as the salt of the earth? Are you enchanting and enlivening the flavours of life, are you feeling, thinking, and living deeply in the pain and joy of the world or are you living in another way that Jesus doesn't describe? He is pretty harsh too when considering the prospect of salt without saltiness: "If salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled underfoot."

It seems to me that a life of saltiness that Jesus is getting at here is a life that, without fear, moves into the world in love and affection. We salty ones don't allow ourselves to be bowled-over by the tragedies and disappointments of the world, but we also don't allow ourselves to fall into quiet resignation over injustices. We followers of Jesus, we salty ones, walk a brave line of love into the deepest experiences of life, neither being swept away nor disengaged. This brave walk of course happens only because we are empowered by the Holy Spirit, by the strength which is given to us in the sacrament we are sharing in today, a love which is constant and unending.

So what does this salty life look like? To me it seems that a salty life of following Jesus is one where, first and foremost, the disciple has begun to make peace with themselves. Where in my life have I shied away from the cold facts of life? Which relationships have I let grow cold because the truth is just too awkward? Which aspect of my personality and habits is hindering a zest of life? I make my confession of how I am falling short. What needs the salt of Jesus? And in this sacrament this saltiness can be restored as we choose to be embraced in this love that will not let us go.

Next, I suppose, is that the salty ones begin to move beyond themselves and gently offer themselves to others; hopefully simply as presence, support and friendship and not as an overpowering fixer. We are salt, not cayenne. Salt allows the flavours of others to shine. Cayenne insists on being forward and in your face. Being salt means that we listen, we notice, and we don't have to have our way.

Being salt for the earth means to remind the world of what God created it to be: a loving commonwealth that is created for the flourishing of all and that anything other than that is not living in accordance with how God desired things to be. We are the salt of the earth, called so by Jesus himself. So let us go when we leave this mass to be salt and nothing else, not sugar, not skim milk masquerading as cream!

Walk bravely into the world and know that we go together empowered by the Holy Spirit.