

The celebrated Chilean poet Pablo Neruda wrote many odes. An ode, you will recall, is a poem that addresses its subject in an exalted fashion. In an “Ode to a Nightingale” Keats directly addressed an enchanting bird, and in “Ode on a Grecian Urn” he addressed an ancient ceramic vessel.

Neruda wrote odes to everyday, common things, including an artichoke, laziness, wine, a seagull, bees, bicycles, his suit, his socks, and salt.

*. . . in its caverns
jewels of rock salt, a mountain
of light buried under earth,
transparent cathedral,
crystal of the sea, oblivion
of the waves.
And now on each table
of the world
your agile
essence,
spreading
a vital luster
on
our food.*

*Dust of the sea, in you
the tongue receives a kiss*

*. . .
taste imparts to every seasoned
dish your ocean essence;
the smallest,
miniature
wave of the saltshaker
reveals to us
more than domestic purity
but also the essential flavor of the infinite.*

The smallest grain of salt, almost invisible, holds the flavor of the infinite. I don't know if Neruda had Jesus' “Sermon on the Mount” in mind, but I have not read a better commentary than his poem.

Looking at his disciples, at us, Jesus declares *You are the salt of the earth!* We may not be thrilled to be tiny grains of salt in the ocean of humanity, but as disciples of Jesus we are the “flavor of the infinite” that seasons and preserves the neighborhood.

Note the language: Jesus does not say, *You will be salt and light*, or *You should be salt and light*, but *You **are** salt and light!* Disciples of Jesus, whether they want to be or not, *are* the flavor of the infinite, the light of the world.

Bonhoeffer corrected the Reformation theologians who tried to equate the disciples' message with salt and light. No! What is meant, says Bonhoeffer, is that the disciples entire existence *is* salt and light!

R. S. Thomas, a priest and poet of Wales, offers compelling commentary on the disciples as light.

*For some
it is all darkness: for me, too,
it is dark. But there are hands
there I can take, voices to hear
solider than the echoes
without. And sometimes a strange light
shines, purer than the moon,
casting no shadow, that is
the halo upon the bones
of the pioneers who died for truth.*

Disciples of Jesus are the strange light of truth that holds out hope in the dark. Disciples of Jesus are the flavor of the infinite that seasons and preserves the world.

The metaphors of salt and light refer to the immediately preceding beatitude: Blessed are those who are persecuted for doing what is right. Or, How blissful those who have been persecuted for the sake of what is right.

As long as disciples of Jesus do what is right—what is just and good—rather than what is convenient or expedient, they are salt and light. If, when faced with resistance or persecution, fear overwhelms faith, cowardice crowds out courage, they become worthless as salt that has lost its flavor, as a light hid under a bushel.

Until the fourth century, the Gospel of Matthew, and the Sermon on the Mount in particular, held place of honor in the life of the church. They also held place of honor in the Moravian Church in the 16th and 17th centuries. The Beatitudes were not viewed as impossible demands, but descriptions of the ways disciples are salt and light.

St Augustine frequently used church funds to purchase the freedom of slaves. On one occasion, some members of his congregation stormed a ship and freed over 100 slaves. His church property served as sanctuary for economic migrants. He stood with debtors protesting economic inequality. He pled for penal reform and constantly argued against the death penalty.

The flavor of the infinite that seasons and perseveres, the strange light of truth that holds out hope in the dark, is who you are as a disciple of Jesus!