Sermon on Epiphany 5A
(Matthew 5:13-20)

The lady at the car rental counter couldn’t have been more pleasant, “It’s your first time in Palm Springs? Well let me see what I can do…let’s see, how about a black mustang convertible? Same price as the corolla.

I had approximately one millisecond of environmental angst—“should I really be burning that extra fuel?”—before I said, “wow, sounds fabulous, thank-you.”

Later that evening driving back to my relative’s place where I was staying, I rolled back the top and stared at the sky full of stars. It hit me, “I’m in the city and I can see the stars, what’s going on?”

It was then that I noticed something that anyone familiar with the area will know; the lighting ordinance only allows for indirect lighting of streets, homes and businesses. No neon signs, very little direct light is visible anywhere you look.

The effect is stunning, even at night I could see the dark-shaded Santa Rosa mountains rising out of the Coachella valley like hooded monks standing in their prayer stalls and the stars were spectacular, all while driving down the main city thoroughfare.

With the right kind of light you can illumine the night so that it actually can still be night!

This memory has helped me come at our interesting gospel reading a bit differently than I have in the past. It’s not just that Christ is the Light of the world and the Salt of the earth; it’s not just that Christ’s body, the Church is called to reflect his image in this regard.

Just as importantly, it’s the *way* we shine, the *amount* of salt we are that illumines the darkness and draws out the complex flavours of the good, the true and the beautiful!

Before we get to that, in light of the beatitudes (remember, blessed are the poor, the persecuted, those who mourn etc.) in the previous verses to what we just read, we discover that Jesus is indeed addressing those who’ve had horrific experiences, who feel as if they’ve exceeded their “best before date”

He tells them that they aren’t washed up; according to God’s politics, they’re right where it’s all happening.

And so the way we generally approach today’s scripture is important: wherever we are on our life’s journey it’s important to remind ourselves of Jesus’ actual wording: we’re not urged to *become* salt and light; we are told that we *are* salt and light.

Even as we need to creatively craft a life and society we do so not from “the outside” as it were but from “the inside,” from the basis of who we already are! Every part of the journey, even the horrific bits, matter. Even those parts of the journey that seem to rob us of identity can’t ultimately rob us of what God says we are.

This truth, that we are already salt and light, also informs the negative bits of his teaching. When he says “salt that has lost its saltiness and really isn’t good for anything” he’s pointing out an absurdity: salt can’t lose its saltiness without failing to be salt.

He’s buttressing the courage of those of us who think we’re nobodies: “you are salt don’t let anyone tell you otherwise!”

Likewise, when he says at the end of our text “unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven,” he’s not asking us to be even more exacting in our keeping of laws.

Which, if he was, would put a pit in all our stomachs. Instead he’s trying to help those of his first listeners and those of us here today who are lousy at keeping rules and of conforming to what religion “as a system” expects of us.

He’s helping us to live according a more central purpose than looking good or putting ticks on a checklist of laws. If we love more from our identity as God’s beloved, more from “you are salt and light,” we’ll find that we live more from what each situation, each person in our life needs rather than the letter of the law.

Jesus has come, not to give us heavy burdens but to lighten our burden: God’s loving justice isn’t out of reach, but neither are we able to fully describe it outside of our relationships and the decisions we’re making.

Which brings us in a roundabout way to my opening illustration. For those of you that have looked at the ingredient list for some of your favourite foods, for me lets say lasagna or Bolognese sauce, you’ll find that near the bottom, at least in amount, is salt.

There’s far more beef and tomatoes that salt in the best spaghetti sauces but yet, without the salt, the flavours of those more plentiful ingredients wouldn’t taste nearly as good!

Conversely, if you put too much salt in anything, not only isn’t it good for you, it overwhelms the flavours of the other subtle spices and makes the whole thing lousy.

What makes salt and light attractive to other human beings and helpful, actually, is the right amount!

You’d think that would be so obvious as to need no comment but some religious folk are convinced that if Jesus says we are salt and light that there can never be enough of either.

This “obvious insight” has some rather startling implications. It means that we’re not meant to “control things” but to “season things.” From a lighting perspective, we’re not meant to put a “spotlight on it,” but practice accent lighting. Our task, like the lighting ordinance in Palm Springs isn’t to draw attention to ourselves, but to God!

The Kingdom of God is not yelling, shouting or “getting our way.” This is not how God has ever presented the Divine Will. Rather it is more about shining an appropriate light on an issue or, through prayer, somehow being a person who’s humility and integrity draws out other’s curiosity.

Sometimes this will mean having the courage to point out negative implications as Jesus does with the Pharisees but always shining that appropriate light on our own biases first. Remember the saying about removing the log from our own eye before removing the speck from our neighbour’s eye?

Another powerful implication has to do with the health of our community. Wherever churches are dominated by the pastor or priest or a few “strong” personalities there is dysfunction.

Even leadership should be more about “seasoning” then dominating. But often domination happens because the rest of us refuse to add our “spice” to the sauce.

The calling of the Body of Christ is to model how unity and diversity can work for the wider world; each member takes a role, adds her spice, her gift, simmer it all together over time (love and commitment always take time) and then you have a table that others want to sit down at!

Putting all this together we find that Jesus has given us both an identity and a mission; he’s told us what we are and how to live how we are and he’s done it with two vivid metaphors: light and salt.

A few years ago, I was in a bad way. Someone very close to me began to practice radical encouragement towards me. They helped me begin to practice meditation; helped me begin to risk being more vulnerable and become less angry.

And they did this subtly, first by simply being there and not belittling me. When I was a jerk this person didn’t yell at me or pull back instead they become *less* critical.

This person seasoned my life, helping me wake up to who I am and how I might live more creatively. And this, my friends is how the Holy Spirit is present in your life right now!

Not as a spectacular display or something overwhelming but rather the Triune reality allowing us the space to discover the gift we are already in order that we may more fully become what we’ve always wanted to be!