*Sal Terrae, Lux Mundi*

February 9th, 2020

5th Sunday after Epiphany

An old Albanian law requires that “the guest shall be welcomed with bread, salt and heart". This is a truly beautiful statement worthy of love; if I knew any Albanian, I would have made the sermon title Albanian. Instead, I chose Latin. It is a beautiful language, and it was the language of the Western church and science for many years. The title simply means “salt of the earth, light of the world.” I once studied Latin, but as time goes by, I forget more and more. I wonder if I can even make it through a chapter of Sallust or Livy now. It is the same, I believe, with the language we learn from the word of God. Without constant immersion and reflection, we also can lose our spiritual language, the deeper meanings and richness of the language the Lord speaks to us. A language is a sacred thing. It enables wisdom, relationship, memory; it enables prayer and praise. One can easily dismiss this, saying that unless a language stays relevant, its fate of extinction is inevitable. In 2013, the Livonian language vanished from the earth. The last speaker was Grizelda Kristina. Livonian was spoken in the Baltic regions of Estonia and Latvia. I recently started reading the books of Jaan Kross, an Estonian writer who suffered under Soviet persecution and censorship. Kross writes about Balthasar Russow, the first Livonian historian, who was also a Reformed pastor. For him, language meant preserving historical memory and identity in the midst of one of Europe’s most tragic and dangerous crossroads. One can argue that the Reformation was quite integral to many peoples for the discovery of their own languages as well as the language of Scripture. The invention of the printing press was a great aid in that respect. I do not believe that the extinction of a language makes it or its speakers irrelevant. I seriously doubt that Grizelda Kristina thought her language was irrelevant, even if the sadness of history sometimes made her felt that way. Nevertheless, it seems to be a brute fact of history that unless a language spreads and is spoken, it perishes. And thus, we return to salt and light. *Sal terrae, lux mundi.* To be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. These are basic words, essential words in the vocabulary of the New Testament, in the language of the Gospel.

*Sal terrae.* The salt of the earth. An old Albanian law requires that the guest shall be welcomed with bread, salt and heart. Salt was a welcoming symbol in many cultures. Thus, to be the salt of the earth is to be welcoming. And this welcoming is, first and foremost, directed towards God: “‘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 under foot” (Matthew 5:13). Where does our salt get its freshness? Where does the salt of the faithful come from? In our world, salt seems relatively easy to gain. One merely walks to the supermarket and buys some salt. In the ancient world, it was not that simple. Caravans crossed thousands of miles of the Sahara to transport salt. There are two still in existence today: the Azalay route between Timbuktu and the Taoudenni salt mine in Mali, and the Taghlamt route between Agadez and Fachi in Niger. In the old days, a salt caravan might number up to 10,000 camels. Most of these caravans have been replaced by trucks and paved roads, but nothing replaces salt. Only salt can be salt. Our salt comes from the saving work of the Lord. As we read in 2 Kings 2:19-22: “Now the men of the city said to Elisha, ‘Behold, the situation of this city is pleasant, as my lord sees, but the water is bad, and the land is unfruitful.’ He said, ‘Bring me a new bowl, and put salt in it.’ So they brought it to him. Then he went to the spring of water and threw salt in it and said, ‘Thus says the LORD, I have healed this water.” In the Book of Ezra, we hear the phrase, “to eat the salt of the palace” (Ezra 4:14). The phrase suggests royal favour and dependence on the palace for a livelihood, much as the Roman term *salary*, which we still use today, comes from the word *sal,* salt. The faithful eat the salt of the palace, the palace of the Lord—all of our blessings, our livelihood, our wisdom, our spiritual health—comes from eating the salt of the palace. The only way we can lose the salt of the palace is when we stop eating it, when we leave the palace or the service of the King. It takes work to produce salt; it takes dependence and faithfulness to receive the royal salt. Either way, it cannot come from ourselves. Contemplatives often speak of the interior life. At the risk of sounding heretical, I wonder if we give much thought to the exterior life. I do not necessarily mean the world of news, politics and natural disasters. I mean the real, exterior life of work, trade, relationships, discoveries—being in the world. I mean the exterior life—the way we mine and transport salt—the way we depend on something outside of ourselves to become salt in a world for no other reason than to have and share salt that gives flavour and preservation and nutrition to our bodies, to other bodies, regardless of what happens. After thousands of years, there are still salt caravans crossing the harshest deserts of the earth. Where is our caravan going? What are we transporting?

*Lux mundi.* The light of the world. Jesus says, “‘You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:14-16). This is a beautiful, timeless passage. Anyone who has traveled at night knows the joy of suddenly seeing the lights of a city appear, especially when your are coming out of the dark mountains or empty plains where there has not been much in the way of lampposts or houselights for hundreds of miles. One of the most shocking things we learn in the New Testament, however, is that light is not always what we think it is. Later in this same Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, “If your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!” (Matthew 6:23). What you think of as the light within you might be darkness, and if it is, then how great is that darkness! Light is a means to see, and Christ is that light by which we see. A city on a hill can be hidden, if it is not lit up with streetlights and lampposts. A city on a hill can be hidden if the light within it is indeed darkness and not light, if the Christ proclaimed is not really Christ at all. Light, in Scripture, is associated with the spoken word of God—from the very first lines of Scripture: “And God said, let there be light, and there was light” (Genesis 1:3). The language of God is the beginning and source of our light. Later, in the Psalms, we read: “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path…Your testimonies are my heritage forever, for they are the joy of my heart. I incline my heart to perform your statutes forever, to the end” (Psalm 119:105-112). And thus Jesus says, in our reading today: “For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished” (Matthew 5:18). Elsewhere in this same Gospel, Jesus says: “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away” (Matthew 24:35). Light is also forever welcoming. I remember, many years ago, working in the Kansai area. I would walk many streets in Kishiwada, Nara, Kobe, Kawanishi, Kyoto, and northern Osaka. I delivered newletters from North Osaka Gas Company and the Kinki Railroad Real Estate news. As twilight darkened, I would sometimes have to pass through these neighbourhoods of abandoned houses. Gate after empty gate, dark and without light. Then suddenly, one might turn a corner and there would be the lantern of a shop—an *izakaya* or a ramen shop or a sushi joint, and immediately my spirits would lift. There were people and food nearby, the sounds of music and laughter, and not that gnawing, quiet darkness. One could read the street signs again. Light welcomes and gathers people. Light makes us able to read the road signs again. Without the enduring light of Christ, we are spiritually and existentially illiterate, lost in a labyrinth of abandoned habitations, unable to find our way. The world needs the lanterns on display—not buried under baskets.

An old Albanian law says that the guest should be welcomed with salt, bread and heart. That last element is most significant. Remember, this is a medieval canon, a law, related to the ancient code of *besa,* hospitality. Our hospitality begins with opening our hearts to the salt and light of God, bringing our humble bread and salt to God with heart, and thereby becoming salt and light for the world. It is a matter of the heart. Reason and intellect are wonderful; they have given us tremendous power and convenience in this earth—but I am not sure that our reason or intellect make any sense before God, whose wisdom far surpasses anything we could imagine. What do we hope to convince God of? What do we hope to argue with God? It is not through intellect that we find God, but through our hearts. The heart that seeks God finds God, and finding God, finds the intellect illuminated with the light of God. This is the how we become salt and light—when the word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path.