

Isaiah 58:1-9, Matthew 5:13-20  
Saint Paul's Episcopal Church  
8 February 2026

In nomine...

Above the great west doors of Westminster Abbey in London are ten statues. In the 1990s the Abbey undertook a major restoration of the West front, and the decision was made to fill the ten niches that had remained empty since the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Many, many Christians had been killed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the Abbey wanted to draw attention to this reality. Each statue was carefully designed by an artist from records and photographs of the individuals represented; they were then carefully crafted from French limestone. Some of the statues are of folks whose names we know. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who of course preached here. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was murdered by the Nazis for his resistance to their way of hate. Saint Maximilian Kolbe, a Franciscan friar who while being held at Auschwitz traded his life for the life of another prisoner. And Saint Oscar Romero, the El Salvadorian Bishop, who was murdered while saying mass for his commitment to the poor and the persecuted.

Other names are less well known. One such name is that of Manche Masemola. Manche was born to the Pedi people in a village that is northeast of modern-day Johannesburg. The Pedi were confined to a barren land, where it was difficult to raise crops and to make a living.

For decades Christian missionaries had lived among the Pedi, though Manche's parents were not open to the work of the missionaries, they were staunch adherents to the faith and customs of their forebears. In 1919 when Masemola was about six Father Augustine Moeka, an African priest, missionary, and brother of the Anglican Community of the Resurrection, started a mission in Marishane where the young girl lived with her family.

Father Moeka's preaching and teaching spoke to many of the Pedi people, including Manche and her cousin Lucia. For the next several years Manche sought to be baptized, but her parents would not allow it. They were worried that she would leave them or refuse to be married – so they threatened her and beat her. As the persecution continued at the hands of her parents, Manche remarked to Father Moeka and her cousin, Lucia, that she would be baptized in her own blood. On February 4<sup>th</sup>, 1928, Manche's mother and father led her into a remote corner of the wilderness and killed her, they then buried her body near a granite rock. Manche Masemola was baptized in her own blood, just as she had predicted, even longed for.

The stories of Christian martyrs are often difficult to hear. They make us uncomfortable. The reality of death is uncomfortable. The reality of murder more so. Though I wonder if those realities are truly at the heart of why we are uncomfortable with the stories of the martyrs – or is it something deeper?

As Jesus continues the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, he says to those gathered,

“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.

“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. 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.

Salt and light change the world. And this is the standard that Jesus sets for us. We are to be agents of change, agents of revolution, agents of his way of love. Though I wonder, when we kneel near edge of our beds at the end of day and examine our consciences, do we find that we have changed the world *for the better* in some way. Is there someone out there whom we encountered who knows that they are God’s beloved through our interaction? Is there someone who knows that hate will not have the last word, because they encountered the light of Christ in our being? Is there someone who desires to know Jesus more deeply, because the change that he has wrought in our lives is bursting from our chests?

Salt and light though, change not only the world, but they should change us. We cannot be the same after encountering the risen Christ.

Manche Masemola was never baptized, never received the Eucharist, and yet she was unwaveringly in love with Jesus. Every bone in her body knew, that because of him, that she would live forever. Nothing in this world could harm her because of Jesus' sacrifice. And yet we live in a world where the baptized, where those who regularly make their Communion – are the first to sacrifice their commitment to Jesus Christ if it makes power a little easier to gain. We live in a world where those who profess their love of Christ on Sunday, defend racism on a Thursday. We live in a world where those confess to follow Jesus Christ and his teachings, trample on the poor and needy if it means increasing their profit margin.

And if we are honest with ourselves, each of us, must admit that we deny Christ in ways big and small each day. Which is not the ideal, but it is overcome-able. We can get better. We can repent and return to the Lord. And when we keep doing this, because we *will* keep sinning – when we keep doing this, we will eventually be changed. We will be remade into the likeness of Christ. We will learn to desire him above all else. We will hear the call of the prophets, the call to break the bonds of injustice, to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to house the homeless – and we will do these things.

And. And when we are faced with that big choice. The choice to deny Christ or be killed, we will choose to be killed because we have learned to trust in the reality that death holds no power over those who believe in Jesus Christ. Death holds no power over salt and light. Death holds no power over we who know the power of God's love.

When we enter in the heavenly realm at the altar rail this morning, Manche Masemola will be here. King will be here. Romero will be here. Kolbe, Bonhoeffer, Esther John, Janani Luwum, all the martyrs, all those who chose Christ – they will be here. Masemola's mother will be here – forty years after the murder of her daughter she repented and was baptized. Death has no power in God's kingdom.

Each day we face a choice. Love or hate. Despair or light. Death or Christ. Choose wisely, my friends, because our choices affect not only us, but each and every person on this planet.

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