

5th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)  
(Isaiah 58: 7-10 / Matthew 5: 13-16)  
09.02.2020

The Scripture readings heard today draw to our attention our responsibility in regard to the world in which we are called to bear witness to the gospel.

The basic point made by Jesus in the text read this morning is that, having experienced God's salvation and His transforming grace in our lives, we have for mission to share the Good News with all.

The images used in the passage of Matthew's gospel we are considering are interesting. We are called to be *the salt of the earth* and *the light of the world*.

We only have to look around us – and even before that to look into our own hearts – to see how so many people's lives are bland and tasteless, dull and dreary, and, let's dare to admit it, how so many people's lives are often clouded over, to the point of being deeply sombre, and even sometimes wrapped in total darkness.

Into the situation of today's fad and overcast world, as God's People, we are called to be *salt and light*. As Christians we have a Gospel to proclaim, even before we ever open our mouths to speak. As St Francis of Assisi would remind his spiritual children: *Preach always. When necessary use words*. Our whole way of being should be a message of life for others. It is vital that we come to understand that it is a testimony of life that is awaited from us.

The danger for us would be simply to lament that things are as they are in today's world, without making any firm commitment to really engage ourselves to present to those who look to us a reflection of the true life they long to experience.

It is good for us to be reminded this morning that we are called to be men and women whose lives have gospel savour to them; men and women who radiate something of Christ's own light.

A world rife with dysfunctional behaviours; a world in which disorder of all sorts abounds; a world in which there are so many warped relationships between people at every level (and this is true as much in religious circles as elsewhere) stands in need of healthy and balanced, seasoned and radiant, role models.

Our world longs for and stands in need of inspirational figures whose lives have been transformed by the Gospel.

Many folk, younger people especially, have walked away from our Churches and religious institutions because they have been disappointed by our inauthenticity.

How often our Churches have failed to adhere to the Gospel message they announce to others. Unfortunately, Christians' actions have not always matched their words. This can be such a cause of scandal as to be totally off-putting!

People all around us are looking for persons and communities who inspire them to have hope in God. Just yesterday evening I received a letter from someone who is totally disaffected from the Church. This person wrote asking for prayers. In what she wrote she implied that she is open to the forms of credible testimony she discerns here and there.

We must be careful not to underestimate the impact we can have upon others – both positively and negatively. Saying that, I suspect that most of us – to some degree – ignore just how important the testimony of our lives can be.

It is vital that we grasp that we can make a significant contribution as individuals through our contacts with those around us. Frequently our mark upon others will be barely perceptible to us; something we are hardly aware of. It is important for us to hear that we can influence people for the better more than we might be inclined to imagine.

One very important contribution we can make to today's world is to create and maintain what St John-Paul II called *God-enlightened spaces*: communities wherein relationships are lived in the light of Christ; communities wherein the Gospel gives savour to their members' lives. What makes *God-enlightened spaces* are transfigured people: men and women upon whose lives the gospel has dawned, and, in whose lives, its message shines through.

Already in the Acts of the Apostles we are given to see how it was in and through communities of faith *filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit, radiant with Christ's own light*, that the Church was able to reveal not just her own true face, but also the transfigured face of Jesus to the whole world.

We hear Jesus make the point this morning that our world stands in need of men and women who will be what He calls *salt and light*. It is such people who will be the most effective proclamation of the gospel and convincing witnesses to the Good News of God's salvation.

The greatest contribution we can make to the Church's mission to evangelise is to live our lives guided by what Jesus called the *New Commandment*, which amounts to loving one another in our communities of faith and, over and beyond them, loving all who stand in need of care and compassion, attention and charitable assistance.

The message of the prophet Isaiah heard in today's first reading could hardly be any clearer. The prophet emphasises how our *light will shine like the dawn* when we are seen to live our lives tending to others, aware of the needs of all around us, ready to reach out to them and offer them practical help. Isaiah speaks of *sharing our bread with the hungry, sheltering the homeless poor, clothing those we see to be naked*, being attentive, not only in regard to those at a distance from us, but those right beside us – those with whom we share our lives. Isaiah speaks of *being attentive to our own kin*. The prophet calls upon God's people *to act with justice, to do away with the yoke of slavery, the clenched fist, the wicked word*. God's people are to be known as a people who *give bread to the hungry and offer relief to the oppressed*. The Lord's spokesperson concludes by saying that, when we do all this, then *our light will shine in the darkness*.

Pope Francis is forever reminding us that we are called to be a missionary Church and that there must be a real, concrete engagement with the world in which we live if we are to have any impact upon it. Frequently he has reiterated Christ's call to be *salt of the earth and light of the world*, recalling to us that Jesus' words recorded in today's gospel are words addressed to Christian disciples of all times, hence also to us.

Let me quote just one example of Pope Francis' use of the salt and light metaphors, taken from an Angelus address of some years ago. Speaking to the people gathered on Saint Peter's Square he said: *Jesus invites us to be a reflection of His light, through the testimony of good works. He says: 'Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven' (Matthew 5:16). These words underline that we are*

*recognisable as true disciples of Him who is the Light of the world, not in words, but by our works. In fact, it is above all our behaviour that – in the good and in the bad – leaves a sign in others.*

If Isaiah reminds us that we must *do away with the wicked word*, as we just heard, this is another constant reminder that Pope Francis gives us. He is forever repeating that we must be careful about what we say and how we say it. He frequently denounces gossip as an ill that destroys the very fabric of our Christian communities and serves as a counter-testimony which depreciates the credibility of the word of life which the Church has for mission to proclaim. He has spoken with great clarity and firmness on this point when addressing members of the Roman Curia, in his General Audiences and in his daily homilies at the *Casa Santa Marta*. Let me quote Pope Francis once again. In the little passage I will cite here, he deals specifically with the ill effects of what Isaiah calls *the wicked word*. Here I echo words he pronounced in a weekday homily some years ago: *The mission of Christians in society is to give 'flavour' to life with the faith and love that Christ has given to us, and, at the same time to keep away from the polluting germs of egoism, of envy, of malicious gossip (that is, the wicked word) and so on. These germs ruin the fabric of our communities, which instead should shine as places of hospitality, of solidarity and of reconciliation.*

If what Pope Francis calls *these germs* are destructive and cause pollution, salt counteracts their impact. Salt is more than just a flavouring agent. Salt also serves to conserve, to protect, to keep from pollution. It has other properties as well. Salt is also a recognised healing remedy. Wounds are cleansed and disinfected when they are bathed in salt water.

What is striking in the two images Jesus uses – *salt* and *light* – is that Jesus sees them going beyond ourselves and being geared towards others. We are to be *the salt of the earth* and *the light of the world*. The call addressed to us is not just to flavour or illumine our own lives, but to give savour and offer light to others. Pope Francis has said: *As regards the salt that Christians are called to be: it becomes salt when it is given to others.*

I would say that to give of oneself, to give one's life, is a fundamental Christian attitude. This is what Christ did: He gave His life. Indeed, this is what Christ does over and over again! Jesus continually gives His life to us; He constantly gives His life for us. Is Christ's self-giving love, not precisely what we commemorate as we gather to celebrate Eucharist? Celebrating Christ's gift of Himself, we are called to emulate it. The Eucharist engages us to give of our lives with Christ for others.

Salt does not give flavour to itself, light does not illuminate itself: salt gives flavour to food, light enlightens wherever it radiates. Salt savours the food into which it is mixed; light sheds light illumines the space wherein it shines.

May Christ be our light so that we, in our turn, may be a light that illumines others!  
May the Gospel give such savour to our lives that others will want to *taste* for themselves *just how good the Lord is*. Those words from a psalm encourage us to be salt of the earth, do they not?

Amen!