

SALT AND LIGHT

Epiphany 5 Year A

Is 58:1-9a (9b-12); Ps 112:1-9 (10); 1 Cor 2:1-12 (13-16); Mt 5:13-20 Glad 09/02/2020

In the gospel reading from last week, we heard that the kingdom of God is given to the poor in spirit and the earth is given to the meek. What more can there possibly be to the Christian faith? If we can also establish the importance of inward devotion what else could be important? If our Christian faith went no further than this, we would have no trouble pursuing it with all our hearts. Why do we need to clog it with other things—the doing and the suffering? Why can't we just spend our time worshipping God with our spirits and using our thoughts to contemplate his majesty—instead of having to busy ourselves with the external things of the world?

Indeed, many have suggested that we should do just that, but this morning, we will see that there is a more excellent way—a way that is both beneficial to ourselves and more pleasing to God. In this part of Jesus' teaching, there are two things that strike us as being important.

The first thing we need to understand is that the Christian faith is not a private religion. It is a social religion.

Society, today, often talks about the rights of the individual and the privacy of each person's beliefs. But for Christians, faith cannot remain a personal thing. We are encouraged in the Scriptures to gather together for the building up of the body and to exercise our Christian witness in the world. Christianity cannot be exercised in private—it is a social commitment. The Jewish faith, for instance, was also a community religion. Families and communities went to the Temple together. The feasts and festivals were primarily celebrated in the context of the family and community.

And so it is for the Christian faith. Christians gather together to worship God and to study the Word of God. We are a community of faith.

Now, there is nothing wrong with spending time alone when you need a break from the business of life. Indeed, if we spent all day having to communicate with others, we would soon become exhausted and emotionally spent (Just ask a school teacher). We need time by ourselves to renew ourselves physically, emotionally...and spiritually. We need time alone to spend with God, in prayer, Bible study and in meditation.

However, the Christian faith is one that is primarily exercised within the context of the world—wherever that may be for you. When we look closely enough at the beatitudes, we find that the verses that are outlined there, have little value when practiced in private. Indeed, solitude destroys them. Consequently, the beatitudes reach their greatest expression when practiced in the social context of a community.

But, what possible influence can the poor in spirit and the meek have on the world, you ask? Well, I'm glad you asked that question, because Jesus goes on to show just what that influence can be.

The first thing that Jesus affirms in these verses, is that Christian holiness does not exist purely for itself. Rather, it points to Christ. Therefore, when exercised in the midst of the world, Christian holiness serves to point others to Jesus Christ. We do not live our lives as Christians so that others may look at us and see how good we are. When others look at our lives, our lives should be such that they see beyond us to Christ. Indeed, our lives should reflect Christ.

Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth." Now, salt doesn't exist for itself. It exists to enhance the flavour of something else. Salt is both a condiment and a preservative.

As a condiment it helps to bring out the flavour of food. If you're eating a meal that needs salt and the salt-shaker remains on the shelf, the meal misses out on its potential flavour and the salt is useless. If, on the other hand, we use too much salt, then all we can taste is the saltiness of the salt. We use salt, not for its own sake, but to enhance the flavour of the meal. In the same way, our Christian lives are not merely for ourselves but are lived to enhance the flavour of life in and for the world.

But salt is not only to enhance flavour, it's also used as a preservative. Until the invention of refrigerators, salt was, and still is, used to preserve foods, especially meat. (some of you probably know more about that than I do.)

The world, left to its own devices, cannot help but become tasteless and go bad. I don't believe, as some do, that the world, in general, is progressing, by itself, toward a state of perfection. The world without the providence and intervention of God is left to total corruption and depravity. As Christians, we are called, not only to give flavour to the world, but also to preserve, in the world, that which is wholesome and good. We do this through the way we think, talk...and the way we act.

The apostle Paul, in his letter to the Philippians (4:8) states: *"Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things."*

Our words and our actions should show that we care about the issues of life that face us all. We need to cry out against death and destruction and boldly stand against injustice. That is our responsibility. But when salt loses its flavour, it's no good for anything.

So then, Christians are called to remain pure in their faith. Chemists will tell you that salt is a very stable substance. For salt to lose its saltiness, it must have gained some impurities. Salt will only lose its saltiness when impurities are present.

For this reason, Christians are called to remain pure—to be different from the world that's around them. Christians today and always, are called to separate themselves from the world. Now, this doesn't mean that, as Christians, we are to have nothing to do with the world or people who do not have a faith in God. It means that we are to be distinguished from them—by both our words and our actions.

This theme is basic to the Sermon on the Mount. It's built on the assumption that Christians are different and it *calls* us to be different—and we *must* accept the responsibility that this places upon us.

Christians become unsalty or tasteless, when the gospel they preach is mixed with things that are unwholesome in the world.

As Christians, our witness becomes ineffective when we take on those values of the world that are at variance with those of the Christian faith. We often do this unintentionally and unthinkingly, so that the final result is that our lives, as Christians, are no different from those around us—as those who do not confess the Christian faith.

Some years ago the Morgan Gallop pole is did a survey of the Church in America. When drawing their conclusions, they stated, in part: “Never before has the church made such inroads in the society but at the same time making so little difference.” Even if the Church is growing (and we all hope that it does); if the way we live our lives is indistinguishable from others around us, we will never make an impact on society.

Well, you might ask, why can't I exercise my Christian faith and works privately so that I don't draw attention to myself? Are we not told that we should do our good deeds in secret? Well, in this passage, Jesus tells us that It's impossible for Christian faith to be exercised in hiding. Just like a city built on a hill, cannot be concealed, it's impossible for a devout Christian to remain hidden.

When Jesus said, “You are the light of the world,” he was pointing to the truth of the Christian's task; that is, to shine as a light into a world darkened by sin and corruption. You only have to take a look at our current news media to see the darkness that hangs over the world: murder, corruption, war, natural disasters, disease—and the list goes on. Just like salt, light does not exist for itself, but exists to illuminate things so that they may be seen as they are. Christians, as the light of the world, are to highlight the reality of life—and that reality includes our saviour, Jesus Christ.

Next time you enter a darkened room and reach up to turn on the light, I want you to take particular notice of what happens next. I would suggest that, as if by instinct, you will *not* simply stand in the doorway and stare up at the electric light bulb. In fact, you'll probably not pay any attention to the light bulb at all, but rather will focus your attention on what it is you want to see or do in that room. The only time that light bulb will draw your interest is if it's blown and doesn't work. One does not, look at the light but to what the light illumines.

So also, the Christian, through good works, as an expression of faith, highlights for others the state of the world and the knowledge of Jesus Christ as redeemer of the world. Jesus is not just talking about those things that are done out of love for others, but of correct teaching, of stressing faith and showing how to strengthen and preserve it.

As Jesus' disciples, we are not to hide our Christian faith, but be who we are—expressing our faith, openly and honestly, before God and before other people. Then, as others look at what we say and what we do, they will give glory to God.

There is a world of difference between, doing good works for your own glory and people seeing your good works and giving glory to God. The difference is motive. If we do good works so that others might look at us and see how good we are, then we are doing them with wrong motives. If, on the other hand, our good works are a response to the grace of God and motivated by a love of God and of people, then people will look passed us and be shown Christ. They will be able to see the difference.

Our good works, which we do for the sake of other people, are the embodiment of the Gospel we preach. Whether we say anything or not, what we do indicates to others our understanding of the gospel.

And while we need to understand that, while Jesus states that Christians are the light of the world, it is in fact, God, in Christ, who is the source of that light. It's only through Christ and his redeeming work on the cross that his light can shine through us.

As we contemplate what it is for us to be salt and light in the world, we must remember that it is only by the grace of God that we *can* have any effect in the world. Jesus has called his followers to preserve that which is good and wholesome and to shine as lights in a darkened world. And so, the church in the world has a double role—as salt to arrest, or at least to hinder, the process of social decay, and as light to dispel the darkness. You are the salt of the earth, so be salty. You are the light of the world, so shine. For it is Jesus Christ who is at the heart of this counter-culture and the source of the light that is to overcome the darkness.

To him be all glory, honour, majesty and praise. Amen.