

5th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(Isaiah 58:7-10 / Matthew 5:13-16)
05.02.2017

In what I call *a former incarnation* – when I was novice-master at the Abbey of Bec – I remember once taking a novitiate class in which I had some scientifically-minded novices. In a gospel sharing one day these novices came out with all sorts of considerations about the effect of salt upon soil that I still having fully grasped, so I won't be going there with you this morning. I suppose like most of you, I am more used to salting food than salting the earth, so let us approach the image of salt used in today's gospel passage from the perspective of the effects of salt in food preparation.

We could say that in most cases salt gets lost in food aliments, but it is evidently there, giving savour to them.

The same is true of yeast in flour – which is another image we find employed elsewhere in the gospels; it also gets lost in the mix. Just like salt which is used to season, so too yeast – which is used to make the dough rise – once it is blended into the flour-mix, is no longer distinguishable from the rest of the flour and its impact cannot be subtracted. It will make the dough rise.

These images employed by Jesus in His parables speak to us of the effect His disciples are called to have within society.

The first point I see being made here is that, at one level, as Christians we are called to blend into the society in which we live.

But, if at one level, we are called to be indistinguishable from those around us, at another level and at the same time, we are called to really distinguish ourselves by having an impact on life around us. We might say that we are called to give gospel savour to society and thereby to enhance it; we might say that we are called to give society a certain *lift*. We could think of ourselves as being called to give a *resurrection-lift* to life in this world in which we live.

If, in certain respects, as Christians, we are not to stand out from others – certainly not in the sense of standing *apart from* or *cut-off from* others – at another level and in a very real way, we are to meant to bring to the society in which we live a fuller dimension.

We are to impact this world in a way that leads it to be more what it is called to be: a place in which people can live their lives fully to the glory of God. We are called to have a transforming effect upon society; to change it for the good, to ameliorate it... from within!

What we Christians are called to bring to the world in which we live is that life-transforming ingredient which we call love. It is love that changes situations, people, the world.

While Christian discourse is important, it is not enough. It is not what we say that will have the greatest impact upon others, but the way we live our Christian lives. We should live in a way that manifests love in action. St John writes in his First Letter: *God is love*. To bring love into anything is to bring God into it. To bring love into everything is to bring God into all things.

The images employed by the gospels to speak of the effect Christians are called to have – the images which speak of what Christians are to be – point to both the greatness and the humility of our witness; they point to both the oh so powerful and yet such very gentle impact we are called to have upon the world in which we live

In the images Jesus employs He flags up for us our responsibility vis-à-vis the world in which we live and just what it is that the world awaits from us for its amelioration.

The passage from Matthew's gospel we hear this morning makes it clear that we are called to be *salt* and *light*: the *salt of the earth* and the *light of the world*.

It seems to me that a second very important point is being made here. It is that the focus is not on ourselves alone. We are meant to live for others. To be *salt of the earth* and *light of the world* entails being salt **for** the earth, light **for** the world.

In John's gospel Christ-Jesus speaks of Himself saying: *I am the light of the world*. In today's passage from Matthew it is said: *you (that is we) are the light of the world*. Also comes to mind that passage in Paul's writings (Philippians chapter 2) which reminds us that we are called to be *bright shining lights in this darkened world*.

The point to grasp is that we are called to reflect Christ – indeed, to be Christ for others; to make Christ visible. Our vocation as Church is to be a sacrament (a visible sign) of Christ. As Church, we are called to be the privileged sacrament of Christ's presence and action in today's world.

Today's gospel passage ends with a call for us to *do good*: to pose concrete gestures of love, to carry out good actions in very concrete ways, and in so doing to bear witness to God's love. Just as *Jesus went about doing the good* (to quote a line from the Acts of the Apostles – words spoken by Peter), so we are called to go about doing good, showing compassion and concern. We are brought back here to the call to be men and women for others. When we speak of visibility – a theme introduced by the mention of light – this should be properly understood. Our visibility should be well and truly for others. It should not be so that we may be seen, but so that we may in some small way enlighten people around us, brightening up their lives.

One other point I think it is worth drawing attention to when we consider the two images we find in today's gospel – the images of salt and light – is the contrast between them.

While salt used to savour food becomes invisible, the light of a lamp is visible, it shines out enlightening what is around it. A lamp that is lit is visible to the eye and it attracts attention.

A question arises: How can we hold together the call to be salt (lost, invisible) and yet light (evident, visible)?

Maybe the answer to this question is found by arriving at this conclusion: saying that as individuals we are called to be salt – lost, invisible, discreet; while collectively, as communities, we are called to be light – Church communities which are a clear visible sign, a force for good in our world, a sign of what the world itself is called to, a sign of this world's reconciliation. In the words of St Augustine: *the Church is humanity reconciled*.

A book title (the title of a collection of poems by the late Bishop William Philbin) came to my mind as I tried to tease out the paradox of being invisible and visible. The title he gave to his poetic work *The Bright Invisible* captures for me the call I hear addressed to us by today's gospel passage. I believe is what Jesus is calling us to be today: *Bright invisible* witnesses to Christ's gospel.

We are called to be *salt of the earth* and *light of the world*. The earth needs salt and the world needs light. We need salt, we need light. Literally we need salt to live – we need to have proper sodium levels. We also need proper exposure to light for our well-being.

In the words of an Evangelical Worship Song:

We all need a little salt

Need a little light

Need a hopeful word shining bright

That Worship Song goes on to say:

We can be a little salt

Be a little light

In this darkened world

We can shine, oh shine so bright.

True to Christ's calling, may we be *salt of the earth* and *light of the world* by our whole way of being. Amen!