

FIFTH SUNDAY
IN ORDINARY TIME

YEAR A

Prayer

Psalm 12:4–9

May the LORD cut off all flattering lips, the tongue that makes great boasts, those who say, “With our tongues we will prevail; our lips are our own—who is our master?”

“Because the poor are despoiled, because the needy groan, I will now rise up,” says the LORD; “I will place them in the safety for which they long.”

The promises of the LORD are promises that are pure, silver refined in a furnace on the ground, purified seven times.

You, O LORD, will protect us; you will guard us from this generation forever. On every side the wicked prowls, as vileness is exalted among humankind.

Reading the Word

Isaiah 58:7–10

Is not this the fast that I choose: Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and



not to hide yourself from your own kin?

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.

Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.

Second Reading:

1 Corinthians 2:1–5

When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I came

FIRST READING

Isaiah 58:7–10

PSALM

Psalm 12:4–9

SECOND READING

1 Corinthians 2:1–5

GOSPEL

Matthew 5:13–16

to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.”

Gospel: Matthew 5:13–16

Jesus said to his disciples, “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.

*Scripture quotations from
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Hearing the Word

"Salting the Earth"

Last Sunday's liturgy reflected on the tension that often arises between God's ways followed by believers, and the common values and attitudes that dominate the larger society. This Sunday's liturgy continues with the focus on discipleship, emphasising that the life of the faithful is instrumental in transforming the world and human society in accordance with God's intentions.

The words of the prophet Isaiah in the first reading need to be read in connection with the passage that precedes it, namely Isaiah 58:1-7. In this passage the prophet reports a series of questions raised by the Israelites, who were asking why their religious practices were ineffective. They fasted, prayed and offered sacrifices, yet their prayers remained unanswered, and the expected prosperity and blessing evaded them. Isaiah bluntly responded to their complaints stating that God did not answer their prayers because their religious practices were not accompanied by a genuine concern for one another. Isaiah lists a number of the ordinary and concrete gestures of social concern, such as feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless and clothing the naked. These gestures, according to him, are the true expression of faith and religious commitment. The Israelites traditionally identified three essential practices of piety: fasting, prayer and almsgiving. It appears, that the Israelites of Isaiah's day focussed entirely on the first two, while

neglecting the third. By calling for the practice of almsgiving in various forms, the prophet declares that piety without social concern is ineffective.

The logic behind Isaiah's teaching is that one's personal contact and worship of God must translate into one's involvement with the world and fellow human beings. Thus, through a believer, God himself becomes involved in the affairs of this world, answers prayers and bestows blessings. Effective faith manifests itself in making the lives of others better, particularly those in need. For Isaiah, piety for its own sake misses the mark because it does not infuse the world with God's presence. True believers, by a wholistic practice of their faith, in both religious and social spheres, bring God's presence into the world and change its face.

In his continuing conversation with the Corinthians Paul addressed the question of his approach to the proclamation of the Gospel. In the ancient world, one of the most important and prized skills was the art of speaking persuasively. Greek speakers prided themselves on the ability to prove any point they wished with skilful rhetoric. We know of speaking competitions held in those days, when a speaker had to prove a particular point in one speech, and to negate the very same point in his second speech. Paul refers to this art as "lofty words of wisdom." It is likely that some of his adversaries had accused Paul of manipulat-

ing the Corinthians through rhetoric, so that they would welcome Paul, and accept his message. Paul strongly denies such charges. He points to his meek demeanour when he stood among them. He spoke without appeal to persuasive words and rhetorical conventions. Rather, he delivered the Gospel, through "a demonstration of the Spirit and the power." The truthfulness of his message was proven not by persuasive and manipulative words, but through showing the Gospel he preached at work in his own person. He characterized his life as totally centred on Christ crucified. This commitment and pattern of life transformed him, and the effects of that change could be seen in his life. He did not provide details at this point, but we know what he meant from his second letter to the Corinthians. God's Spirit and power led him to devote his life completely to the cause of preaching the Gospel and developing the faith of others. This is best seen in 2 Corinthians 11:23-29, where the Apostle describes how he continuously puts his very life on the line in order to carry the Gospel to the world. He stopped at nothing in order that the Gospel might be preached and accepted. His faith was effective through absolute devotion to the task of bringing others to Jesus Christ, and thus transforming the world, and society, according to God's design set forth in Christ.

The Gospel passage continues with emphasis on the necessity for a visible manifestation of faith. Matthew employs two metaphors, salt and light, to emphasise that Christian discipleship must affect the world. Salt exists for one purpose – to alter the taste of food; it is meant to effect change. If it does not accomplish this task, if it loses its “saltiness” and does not bring about a change, it is no longer salt. The same applies to discipleship, if it does not affect the surrounding world by changing it according to the pattern set by Christ, it is no longer discipleship.

The metaphor of light conveys a similar message. Biblically, the light usually relates to revelation and faith. The city on a hilltop is clearly visible, particularly at night. Because of its position and its shining lights it dispels darkness and provides orientation. Likewise, the very purpose of a lamp is to illuminate and be seen. Hiding the lamp or covering the light removes the very reason for its existence. Using these images Matthew emphasises that the very reason for discipleship is its visibility. It is meant to provide orientation for others with the purpose of leading them to faith and a change of lifestyle. In the Christian community of Matthew's day this was often a matter of life and death. Publicly demonstrating faith in Jesus could bring about persecution and even death. However, even in spite of these real dangers, Mat-

thew insists that the faith of a disciple can be called “faith” only when it affects society and the world at large.

Today's liturgy of the word brings forth the necessity of a visible manifestation of one's faith and discipleship, with the purpose of transforming the world. Isaiah insisted that true religiosity is not solely a matter of piety. Prayers, fasting and sacrifices, if not accompanied by manifest concern for other human beings, are ineffective. Paul insisted that effective apostleship does not rely on rhetorical skills and an ability for manipulative persuasion. Authentic apostleship is defined by wholehearted devotion of one's mind and body to the task of manifesting the power of the Gospel, and thus making a life-changing difference for those who will accept it. Matthew teaches that true discipleship affects the world. First, discipleship means “being the salt of the earth”, that is, changing the world in a perceptible way. Second, discipleship means “being the light of the world”, that is, serving as an example of faith in order to guide others towards God. For all true believers, the task of discipleship is primarily a matter of “salting the earth”, that is, affecting and changing the world. Such a felt influence makes the life of faith relevant, and enables God to transform the world according to his design and purpose. Such transformation leads everyone to a better

life, the life according to God's promise of salvation, which the Psalmist referred to, stating, “the promises of the LORD are promises that are pure”.

Listening to the Word of God

The theme of this Sunday names us, Jesus' disciples, salt of the earth and light of the world. Jesus used metaphors of salt and light to define our task of being his disciples and living life according to his teaching. Light is indispensable for life itself, while salt makes our food tastier. We will focus our reflection on salt and explore four of its qualities that reflect how we can make life more distinctive and special.

To begin with, salt is white in colour. In the scripture “whiteness” symbolizes holiness and purity. The Gospel of Matthew states, “blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God”. As the salt of the earth we ought to be pure of heart. However, how can we be pure of heart in a world with so many temptations placed before us daily. Is purity possible when we so frequently fall into sin? Yes, purity is possible by daily examination of conscience and a frequent celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation. These practices educate us to make the right choices and wash away our sins so that we remain pure.

The second property of salt is flavour. We use salt in almost every meal. Like salt, we are called to give flavour to

the world. Life in the world ceases to have meaning if we do things merely following daily routines. We can “spice up” and give taste to the world in two ways. First, Isaiah states that God is not interested in a “lip service piety” shown only in prayers, fasting and fulfilling religious duties. These are important, but must be linked with attention and care for the needy and vulnerable among us. The second way is sharing words of encouragement with those who have lost zeal for living, because they no longer see any sense and value in what they are doing. Life will be experienced differently by those we touch in such ways.

Salt has healing properties. When we cut ourselves or have a wound in the mouth, the sting of salt on the wound helps it to heal faster. As Christians we are to “sting” the world with the necessary criticism and correction when things are not done in a just and charitable way. Hatred, jealousy, oppression and exploitation hurt our communities and families. We are called to be healers, but healing sometimes involves an initial “sting” required to begin the healing process.

Finally, salt is also used to preserve food from rot and decay. As Christians we are expected to preserve our world and society from getting rotten through corruption, moral decay, tribalism, racism and self-centeredness. Salting the earth implies that

Christians should function as a “moral antibiotic”. We administer “salt” by presenting examples of high moral standards and a lifestyle defined by Christ’s teaching. The world is rotten when no one has courage to distinguish right from wrong, and declare it openly and courageously. We are called to bring moral clarity and safeguard moral values, and support a dignified human lifestyle.

Jesus warned us not to lose our saltiness. We can easily lose it if we do not remain in God’s presence through listening to his word. This is the true purpose of our piety that consequently empowers us to be “salt the earth”.

Proverb

“Salt
does
not
praise
itself”.

Action

Self-examination

Am I like “salt and light” to my friends, family and community? In what way?

How does my piety and religious observance affect my daily life? Give examples.

Response to God

Today, I resolve and promise God that throughout this week I will do things in such way as to give taste, flavour and meaning to the life of those I meet.

Response to your World

Identify someone in your surroundings that needs you as salt and light. Decide what you are going to do and how to make his or her life “tastier.”

As a group, discuss and identify a vulnerable person or persons in your group or community whom you can offer a genuine material help as expression of your genuine faith and commitment to God.

Prayer

Lord, bring your light to every part of our lives. May it shine through every relationship, every activity, and every word we speak.

Lord, make us the salt of the earth. May our life bring light and hope, joy and peace to those who need it most. We ask all these through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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