

SALT AND LIGHT

Isaiah 58. 1-12

1 Corinthians 2. 1-16

Matthew 5. 13-20

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Today, we have the privilege of considering a very important question: what difference can Christians truly make in the world? Do their presence and actions really matter? Can Christians actually achieve something, given that they are a minority in the world?

At first glance, this is primarily an evangelistic question. If we look at the world in which we live, most countries today are increasingly pluralistic both in terms of race and religion. Christianity, Islam, ancient religions, modern cults, secularism and materialism are all competing for the *soul* of our society. Who's going to be the ultimate winner?

But it is also a social and cultural question. Are Christians truly able to influence the countries in which they live, so that the values and standards of the kingdom of God actually permeate society and culture? If Christians do have such influence, this means that they will be seen to have a *discernible impact* on various issues that are facing us today, including bioethics, the recognition of human rights, the respect for the sanctity of life, a concern for the homeless, the unemployed and the poor, the safeguarding of the environment, and other issues that are of supreme importance to our society and culture today.

If we look at our Lord's words in today's reading from St Matthew's gospel, his answer to our very important question should bring us up with a start. He says, 'You

are the salt of the earth'; and 'you are the light of the world'. According to Jesus, yes, Christians have made a difference; they are making a difference; and they will make a difference. And the very fact that Christ uses the words 'of the *earth*' and 'of the *world*' indicates that he believes that the influence of his disciples (past, present and future) will be far-reaching. As our Lord defines the nature of his disciples' influence, he uses two domestic metaphors, those of salt and light.

Salt was a prized substance in the ancient world. It was so valuable that Roman soldiers were paid in salt; and they would revolt if they did not get their ration. Indeed, our English word 'salary' comes from the Latin word *salarium*, which literally means 'salt-money'.

But salt was not only prized in the ancient world; it was found in every household. The value of salt comes from its application to other things. Think for a moment of the three uses that have been historically made of salt. Firstly, as we all know, salt is used as a seasoning to enhance the flavour of food.¹ It makes things taste better. If you're not sure about this, try going on a salt-free diet; you'll see that the absence of salt makes the food you eat much less interesting.

Secondly, salt can be used as a preservative. Before the days of refrigeration or canning, salt was frequently used to preserve meat when it was not smoked or cured. Packed in salt, meat would not decay and could last for years.

And thirdly, salt has traditionally been considered to be curative. It has medicinal qualities. Before the time of modern medicine, salt was used as an antiseptic. It burned awfully, but salt was often poured into open wounds to clean them of any impurities. Sometimes, a concoction of salt and vinegar was used for the same purpose, to clean and purify the wound so that it would heal more quickly.

¹ Cf. Jb 6. 6. Note that salt was an integral part of animal sacrifices in the Old Testament (Lv 2. 13; Ez 43. 24).

In saying to his disciples that they are the ‘salt of the earth’, Jesus is reminding us that we are to be a seasoning of ‘Christ-likeness’ that enhances the lives of those around us, through the living out of our faith and commitment. We are also to be preservatives that help preserve Christian standards of living in a fallen world. And we are to be curative, bringing a message of hope and forgiveness from a Saviour who can heal human souls, bodies and circumstances.

Being the ‘salt of the earth’ was only one part of our Lord’s vision for his disciples and followers. In our gospel text, Jesus goes on to say that ‘you are the light of the world’.²

In our contemporary and Western society, it is hard to imagine a world without light. In the ancient world however, when night fell, it was completely dark.

When we think about the qualities of light, we realise several things. First of all, light must have a source; and indeed, if we Christians are the light of the world, we are enabled to be so because Christ is our illuminating source. Our Lord, who also called himself the light of the world,³ is the one who provides the light that is in us.

The second thing that we realise about light is that it is reflected. And just as salt seasons, preserves and heals the environment in which it is placed, so light is reflected into its surroundings. Since darkness is the opposite of light, even the tiniest bit of light in a dark room can be seen at once. This means that we Christians who are the light of the world will be immediately noticed in those parts of our society that are darkened by evil.

² The background is Isa 2. 2-5. The light image is part of the invitation to Israel: ‘Come, O house of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the Lord’ (2. 5). In light of Isa 42. 6 and 49. 6, the vocation of Israel is to be a ‘light to the nations’. Paul picks up this theme of Israel’s vocation in Rom 2. 19 (‘a light to those who are in darkness’). The light imagery is developed in verses 15 and 16 of Mt 5, in which Jesus’s followers are challenged to active engagement in their ‘good works.’

³ Cf. Jn 8. 12.

In your opinion, what is our reflected light meant to achieve? Well, as we Christians illuminate the darkness around us, it surely alerts others to the sinful nature of the world in which we are shining. But even more importantly, as Jesus says himself in our gospel text, our light is to shine before others so that they may see our good works and give glory to our Father in heaven. In the original Greek text of this passage, the word for good is *kalos*, which means ‘attractive, beautiful or lovely’. It refers to that which is pleasing to the eye. As we fulfil our role as light in the world, and as the light of our good works reveals the character of God our Father, we will point men and women around us to God and they will praise him.⁴

Up to now, I’ll admit that I’ve been speaking about being ‘the salt of the earth’ and ‘the light of the world’ as if they were a vocation, something that we are called to do and be. And indeed this is true.

However, if we speak of the influence that we are to have on the world around us simply in terms of vocation, we are rather missing the point. When Christ gave his Sermon on the Mount, he did not exhort his disciples or followers to *become* the salt of the earth and to become the light of the world; he said, ‘You *are* the salt of the earth’; and ‘You *are* the light of the world’. This influence is not only our vocation; it is a given.

It is not something we ask for; nor is it something we seek after. It is not even a matter of choice. Now as you know, there are some things that are given to us in life. None of us has a choice about who our parents are. None of us has a choice of what our country of origin is. No, some things are given to us, and by God’s incredible grace, it has been given to you and to me to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. It is a remarkable reality, which brings with it extraordinary opportunities and responsibilities.

⁴ Cf. 1 Pt 2. 11-12; 2 Cor 9. 12-13.

If we are honest with ourselves, we will be forced to admit that we – and the Christian Church as a whole – have not always acted as the salt of the earth; and we have not always acted as the light of the world. Although it seems literally impossible, our Lord speaks of ‘salt that has lost its taste’ and which ‘is no longer good for anything’. And he refers to the absurdity of a lamp that is lit and ‘put under a bushel basket’. We who are followers of Christ are called to be vigilant and to step into our full identities⁵ as we exert the influence that our Lord ordained for us in the world. The Church of Jesus Christ is indeed, and should show itself to be, the salt of the earth and a lamp that is set up on a stand⁶ for all to see.

Dear friends, I hope that you will join me today in taking concrete steps to be the salt and light of God in the world. As we commit ourselves to taking these steps, we shall show individuals and society that we Christians are radically different from non-Christians and that we intend to retain our Christian distinctiveness. And believe me, it really will make a difference!⁷

Amen.

⁵ Our Lord’s teachings about salt and light serve to define the identity of those who follow him faithfully. That identity is fully rooted in Israel’s identity as God’s people, but it also has a significance for the world as a whole.

⁶ The reference to a ‘city built on a hill that cannot be hidden’ is also an allusion to Jerusalem built on Mount Zion. The Old Testament envisions all nations coming to the city of Jerusalem to learn the Torah, with the result being perfect peace.

⁷ At the end of our passage, Jesus is concerned to show his disciples that their righteousness must transcend the formal obedience of which (at its worst) the Pharisees were capable. Christ looks for inner disposition as well as outer action. The Law is not the limit of obedience; it is to be seen rather as the springboard for a life of devotion to our Lord and to his Father.