

5th Sunday
2/5/2023

BEING SALT AND LIGHT

This short gospel passage gives us two rich images: salt and light. It's been noted that neither salt nor light function in isolation. You don't munch on salt straight as you might eat popcorn but salt enhances the flavor of popcorn. Light doesn't operate in isolation either. It reflects off something or through something. Just as salt and light don't work in isolation, nor are the followers of Christ to live in isolation from others.

Salt holds within it many layers of meaning. Salt represents authenticity. We say someone is worth his or her salt. Salt represents purity, something untarnished by evil. Salt acts as a preservative. Long before refrigeration, food was preserved by salt. Think of cured fish or cured meat. Salt can be medicinal, think of gargling with warm salt water. And obviously, salt gives flavor.

Jesus tells his disciples that they are the salt of the earth. That means, they are to be authentic. Jesus, like the prophets centuries before him, detested hypocrisy. Those who say one thing and do another; those who separate their faith from the rest of their lives whether it be in business, in politics on either end of the political spectrum or even in the life of the Church. The gospel suffers when Christians don't act in a Christian way.

Many young people and not so young people are turned off not by Christ's teachings but by the behavior of those who profess to follow him. The famous Supreme Court judge, Oliver Wendell Holmes once remarked that as a young man he might have considered becoming a minister if it were not for a number of dour ministers he had met.

Another way of saying authenticity is purity. In the last Sunday's gospel, Jesus spoke of purity of heart which means doing the right thing for the right reason. Purity of heart is to lead to purity of action, to stand by our Christian principles even if those around us don't or if they mock us. Standing by these values may lead us to be more marginalized in our personal lives, our social lives, maybe even our family lives and in our professional lives. There's a cost to discipleship. St. Paul says, *Do not be*

conquered by evil but conquer evil with good. By such actions Christians can act as a preservative in the world. And as flavor, we're called to make life more palatable and better.

Jesus goes on to say that his disciples are the Light of the World. We may speak of pure light but light always exists in relation to something else. One scholar has pointed out that Jesus doesn't say you're the light of the Church but of the world. The light of Christ that we share here in the Eucharist is called to shine in boardrooms and classrooms; in courtrooms and operating rooms, in whatever place we may find ourselves.

Jesus doesn't say where the source of that light is from although we have a clue elsewhere when Jesus says, *I am the light of the world.* It's his light that is to shine through us. We don't have to produce the light, only to let it shine through us. As with stained glass, where colors are different, we're all different but we seek to let the light of Christ shine through us no matter, who we are, no matter where we are and no matter what we're doing. A light is meant to be seen. A light can guide and a light can warn. So can Christians.

Some of the ways we let the light of Christ shine we find in the first reading. Deeply rooted in the prophetic tradition centuries before Jesus, Isaiah constantly called people to be faithful to their covenant with God and to realize that love of God and love of neighbor go together. He called people to reject hypocrisy and empty worship. As much as they, and as much as we, may try to work around that, love of God and love of neighbor go together and ignoring that truth is dangerous. We do so at our own peril.

Isaiah essentially says, if you want to be right with God, be right with your neighbor, especially the poor and needy. Do we do that? More specifically, he speaks of feeding the hungry, sheltering the oppressed and the homeless, clothing the naked and not turning our back on others. What does Isaiah have to say to you and me, to our parish, to our Church, to our country, to our world?

Isaiah speaks of removing oppression, false accusation and malicious speech. That's another reminder to watch our words. One of the hardest parts of our body to control is our tongue in what we say, how we say, about whom we say and so forth.

It's a lifelong task for everyone. I say that not to discourage people but to encourage them. It's a lifelong task but we can make progress.

Whether as salt, light or any other metaphor, the work of Christians is to be seen, not by showing off or calling attention to ourselves but it still is to be seen and hopefully, to be seen as pointing to the One who calls us to be salt and light.

Faith, while deeply personal, isn't just a private matter; it affects other people and how we relate to others. We strive to make a difference by living our faith with a humble confidence. We're to live in our faith in an open but not necessarily noisy way. A light shines but it doesn't speak. The lesson it gives is by example

With lives of intentional faith, informed by the word of God, nourished by the Eucharist and strengthened by one another, may we always reflect the light and love of God, showing ourselves to be salt of the earth and light of the world.