

Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle A

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Scriptures: Isaiah 58: 7-10; Psalm 112: 4-9; 1 Corinthians 2: 1-5; Matthew 5:13-16

EXEGESIS

I used a number of resources in preparing the exegesis for this Gospel. Most significantly, I made frequent and repeated reference to: extensive materials compiled and written by Richard Niell Donovan of www.sermonwriter.com (Dick employs an impressive list of scholars and writers in the development of his exegesis), commentary written by Fr. Kenneth Morman, S.S.L., scripture scholar and Dean of Seminary Students at the Athenaeum of Ohio-Mount St. Mary's Seminary, and the reflections of Fr. Jude Siciliano, OP, in his weekly publication of *First Impressions*. I would like to express my gratitude to each of these individuals for their extensive work and valuable contribution to this *Homily Help*.

Jesus said to his disciples: "You are the salt of the earth."

"The initial 'you' is emphatic both by word choice...and position" (Boring, 181). It sets the listeners apart from other people who are not the salt of the earth. The initial 'you' is also plural, and thus describes the church. "Each Christian is individually called to be such light, but in Matt. 5:13-14 the community as a whole is challenged to fulfill its corporate mission of serving as salt and light for the world" (Hare, 44). (Sermonwriter)

"Salt has little influence while sitting in a salt shaker. However, it is of great value once it is mixed, in the right proportions, in our food. When it is sprinkled on food, it transforms the food. So also, Christians sitting alone in the comfort of their homes are unlikely to make much of a difference to the people outside their door — the people who need Christ. It is as we rub elbows with others, both Christians and non-Christians, that we have the opportunity to bring a Christ-like flavor to their lives." (Sermonwriter)

Salt then is a perfect metaphor for the people of God: "We must remain active preservative agents, indeed irritants, in calling the world to heed God's standards. We dare not form isolated Christian enclaves to which the world pays no attention" (Blomberg). (Sermonwriter)

According to Fr. Ken Morman, "This saying is unique to Jesus; other things were compared to salt in Judaism, but people never. 'Earth' here refers not to the ground but to the world of human beings (salt does not improve ground!)."

"But if salt has loses its taste, with what can it be seasoned? It is no longer good for anything but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot."

"The Greek word *moraino* has more than one meaning. It can mean 'lost its taste,' but it can also mean 'become foolish.' Matthew was undoubtedly aware of this double

meaning and used the word *moraino* to convey the fact that the disciple who loses his/her spiritual zest has, as a consequence, also become foolish. Foolishness is an important theme in this Gospel. Fools — those who fail to heed the scriptures — are bound to suffer the consequences of their foolishness. The point is unmistakable, as is also its modern application. Any church that adapts itself so completely to the secular world around it that its distinctive calling is forgotten has rendered itself useless" (Hare, 45). (Sermonwriter)

Fr. Morman indicates that "Many commentators discuss the issue of whether in fact salt can 'go flat.' One of the more popular suggestions is that the salt of the Dead Sea is full of impurities which cause it to decompose and so lose its taste; according to Brett, in cooking it was placed in a bag; the sodium chloride would dissolve in the stew and the residue would be taken out and 'trampled underfoot.' . . . The whole point is the impossibility: there's no way of re-salting salt, so don't let your saltiness go flat (what's impossible on the chemical level is a clear and present danger on the apostolic....)."

"You are the light of the world. A city set on a mountain cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and then put it under a bushel basket; it is set on a lampstand, where it gives light to all in the house."

The salt and light metaphors "assure us that we are 'somebody' in God's plan... (and) remind us...that our special identity is linked to mission" (Gardner, 100). Jesus has appointed us to bring light to dispel the darkness of the *kosmos*. It is a sacred duty. (Sermonwriter)

"Our light is derived from our relationship to Christ. Our light is not our own, but is the reflection of Jesus' light. "The text calls the reader, not to more self-exertion, but to believe Jesus' word and to accept and live out the new reality it has already created in the call to discipleship" (Boring, 183). (Sermonwriter)

Fr. Morman indicates that, "The 'you' in this and the previous metaphor are emphasized in Greek: 'It is you who are salt/light....' This suggests to many commentators that the familiar comparison of the Law and Covenant with salt/light for the world is now being transferred from those realities to the disciples: by acting – and not just talking."

"Just so, your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father."

"Like lamps, disciples have a purpose. We are to live in such a way that our good works give glory to God . . . The Jewish concept of good works, as noted in Matthew, are acts of mercy and reconciliation (which) put disciples in service to others (Sweet, 19). Good works are in keeping with the principle of Christian love. If we love one another, our love will be manifested in acts of mercy. Sacrificial service draws people to Christ. Mother Teresa is the classic example, but every community has saints who devote themselves quietly and powerfully to the service of those in need. They are, indeed, the light of the world." (Sermonwriter)

Fr. Morman stresses that “This final verse supplies the ethical application of the metaphor: disciples are to act in such a way that their good deeds have an effect . . . The effect that they are to have, however, is not to draw praise for the disciples, but for their Father in heaven . . . It is by continuing the mission of the Servant, to be a light to the nations (Is 42:6; 49:6), that the Father's purpose in sending Christ is furthered and he is glorified.”

HOMILY

At only six weeks of age, Elizabeth was brought to her local parish church to be baptized. She was the first of her generation and she descended from two Catholic families whose great grandparents had immigrated to the United States. It was a celebratory event for both families.

When the big moment arrived, she was placed naked into the font's warm water up to her chest. Her proud and nervous parents carefully secured her as they awkwardly held onto her. The deacon lifted handfuls of water onto her head and it gently rolled down her face as if she was frolicking in a summer rain. While she was still enjoying the warmth of the font, the golden aromatic chrism was anointed over her entire head dripping down her forehead onto her cheeks. She was beaming and loving every second of the experience. The smell of the chrism filled the vestibule and everyone knew that Elizabeth had been anointed with the Holy Spirit.

The deacon then took the baptismal candle and reached over his head to the top of the Easter candle. Handing the lighted candle to the parents and godparents he told them, “Receive the light of Christ . . . this light is entrusted to you to be kept burning brightly. This child of yours has been enlightened by Christ. She is to walk always as a child of the light. May she keep the flame of faith alive in her heart. When the Lord comes, may she go out to meet him with all of the saints in the heavenly kingdom.”

From the very first moment we become Christian, we are told that, “we are the light of Christ.” Beautiful words but they bring with them an imposing responsibility. “You,” Jesus exclaims; “You are the light of the world; you are my light.” We look around and wonder if he's addressing us or someone else. Pointing a finger here and there with a puzzled look on our faces. “You,” he says again and we suddenly realize it is indeed us; you and me that he's referring to. We squirm hoping to avoid being chosen, but there's no escaping it. “Sounds way too big for me; more like a job for the pope, or another Mother Theresa. Someone impressive looking with far greater financial means and power; someone with clout and a big voice” (Siciliano). Someone who travels overseas and someone the world takes notice of. *They* are the light of the world. Not me. All I carry is this small baptismal candle I received as an infant and I can barely find my way through the dark let alone light the way for others.

“Life has enough challenges and hurdles for us without the extra load Jesus seems to be piling on our backs. “You are the salt of the earth . . . you are light of the world.’ Now I'm to be responsible for it all!? I can hardly hold the everyday things together” (Siciliano). But Jesus has another idea and he asks us to carefully think about our calling to the world, not only to simply share the message but to act on it. Communication is important but words can often ring hollow. Our words have to be backed by our behavior.

We are salt and light, and as intimidated as we may be by this responsibility, our faith demands that we live public lives. As easy as it would be to keep our religious lives in a safe and sound compartment, tucked carefully out of the way, the truth is we have to take a stand—that's our edict from Christ; that's our imperative from the Gospel.

It was forty-eight years ago when Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his "I Have a Dream" speech. Despite nearly a half century, it seems, at times, that so little has changed. As he stood in the shadow of the Lincoln Memorial, he reminded the vast crowd that Lincoln had signed the Emancipation Proclamation—"This momentous decree came as the *great beacon light of hope* for millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice." Summoning energy and passion from his soul, he told the people that he still had a dream that, "my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."

In an editorial just a few days before Christmas, "Fix class inequality to fix our education lag," Mary Sanchez stressed the relationship between solving the class disparities in our education system and our country's ranking in the world in high school and college graduation rates, "but take out underachieving minority students . . . and we're not doing so badly." Today, less than half of blacks, Hispanics, and Native Americans receive high school diplomas. She concludes that the problem is going unattended, for now, "not enough of us are bothered . . . not yet anyway." We are the salt of the earth . . . we are light for the world.

It was just in the waning weeks of last year that the DREAM Act was defeated in Congress. This act would have enabled young people who immigrated illegally to the United States with their parents to pursue higher education or serve in the military—it would have provided a path for them to become citizens. The DREAM act was caught up in the immigration crisis of this country which splits our citizens almost right down the center—it divides family members, friends, neighbors, politicians and parishioners. Sound familiar? What is it that we are afraid of? Is it the fear of someone who is different than us—the color of their skin, their heritage, their country of origin, their immigration status, and their employment standing? Or is it an issue of economics or entitlement? Just what is it?

Isaiah's opening words from our Old Testament reading spell out the actions we are to take if we want to receive the blessings of the covenant—share your bread, shelter the oppressed and homeless, clothe the naked, and satisfy the afflicted. These ancient words were first spoken to a people who had just returned from exile. They should have been eager to do everything that God was asking them to do. And the blessings they were to receive in return were in the form of light; a veritable king's ransom: "a symbol of deliverance, of prosperity . . . of God's favor" (Bergant). But make no mistake about it—these were not suggestions or encouragements for the Israelites; nor are they for us. They're directives and mandates. They deal with our hands-on involvement in helping others meet their basic needs—not from a distance, but up close and personal. "There is no thought here of merely giving from one's surplus, but a matter of both giver and receiver eating of the same loaf . . . the poor who have been cast out are to be brought into your home; the naked are to be covered whenever they are encountered" (Bergant). We must be open to any and all requests made of us. If we stand up for others, put ourselves at risk, subject ourselves to ridicule and face criticism for our positions, our concerns and our actions, we're doing what Christ asked us to do.

Catholicism doesn't permit us to stand apart from the world, but requires that we help shape it. Catholicism doesn't mean that we can leave the difficult and worldly tasks and responsibilities to others, but requires that we take them on ourselves. We are everywhere in our society and our community. We are teachers, nurses, doctors, corporate executives, bankers, investment counselors, factory workers, and small business owners. We are in the world, in the factories, in the schools, in the hospitals, and everywhere "social justice and the common good are built up or torn down day in and day out in the countless decisions and choices we make" (Siciliano). We are to: get informed on these sensitive issues, speak out taking unpopular public positions, write letters to public leaders insisting on the right action, and imprint the correct values on our children and grandchildren by how we speak and behave. Standing silently on the sidelines abdicating responsibility and action is not an option.

Ours is not an easy religion but one that challenges us, not to become something we are not, but to become who we really are, reflections of our true identity, the one we received at our baptism—"salt and light is who we are right now and that is how we are to act" (Siciliano).

Some Excellent Resources for Preaching

Alling, Roger and David J. Schlauffer, eds. *Preaching as Prophetic Calling, Sermons That Work XII*. Harrisburg: Morehouse Publishing, 2004.

Bergant, Dianne and Richard Fragomeni. *Preaching the New Lectionary Year A*. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2001.

Buetow, Harold A. *Ode to Joy, Homily Reflections for Sundays & Holy Days, Cycle C*. NY: Alba House, 1997.

Dominican Recommended Preaching Preparation Resources:
<http://www.domlife.org/dlc/Preaching/preachingresources.htm>

Donovan, Richard Niell. Sermonwriter, Resources for Lectionary Preaching,
www.sermonwriter.com .

Pilch, John J. *The Cultural World of Jesus: Sunday by Sunday, Cycle A*. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1995.

Siciliano, Jude, OP. "First Impressions: Preaching Reflections on Liturgical Year A."
<http://www.preacherexchange.com> .

Wallace, James A. with Robert P. Waznak and Gueric DeBona. *Lift Up Your Hearts, Homilies for the "A" Cycle*. New York: Paulist Press, 2004.