

You are the Salt of the Earth and the Light of the World

Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time¹

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Sermon on the Mount by Fra Angelico. Firenze

“You are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Your light must shine before others that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father,” says Jesus. Today’s readings provide an answer to this basic question, what does God expect from each one of us? By using the images of the salt and the light, Jesus explains his expectations for us and our mission in the world. We are God’s people, his children. “The People of God is marked by characteristics that clearly distinguish it from all other religious, ethnic, political, or cultural groups found in history.”² As people of God Jesus, gave us a program of life, the Beatitudes, and a mission to accomplish.

Last week the Gospel of Matthew chapter 5 presented the first part of the Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes. In the Bible the Mount evokes the presence of God. At the Mountain Jesus reveals his law to his disciples, the Beatitudes, the law of the redeemed. Today Jesus presents the second part of the Sermon on the Mount. This section is as important as the first one because it talks about our specific mission in the society and the concrete actions which God expects from us. He has high expectations from us, “You are the salt of the earth and the light of the world.” At Jesus’s time the salt was used to preserve food, and to add flavor it. Furthermore, salt in the Middle East represented values such as solidarity, life and wisdom (Cf. Pope Benedict XVI). We, as Catholics must help to preserve the society with Christian values and give a new flavor to the world. We are called to “season” with divine wisdom the hearts of the human race which had been made tasteless by the devil.

We must be aware because salt can become insipid. Christians can also become insipid when they adopt the false values of the world, forgetting God slowly and imperceptibly. Jesus said, “You are the salt of the earth. But if salt loses its taste, it is no longer good for anything. ” A saint from the 5th century St. Chromatius said, “Those who have been educated for the faith and in heavenly wisdom shall remain faithful and steadfast and not ‘lose their taste.’ If they forsake the faith and divine wisdom, they either plunge headlong into heresy or return to the folly of unbelievers.”

The second image that Jesus uses is the light, “You are the light of the world,” he says. The light serves to illumine darkness. We are the light of the world. Such light does not come from us. We do not possess any light. We are not the source of light. The light that illumines our life is Jesus Christ. He illumines our darkness. As children of God our duty is to reflect the light of Christ, and to illumine the darkness of the

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² Catholic Church. (2000). Catechism of the Catholic Church (2nd Ed., p. 206). Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference.

world. By showing the light of truth, we can make the darkness of error flee from people's hearts. Where and when did we receive that light? We received it in the sacrament of Baptism. At the end of the ritual the priest gave your parents a candle, which represented the light of Christ. He said to them at Baptism, "Parents and Godparents, this light is entrusted to you to be kept burning brightly. This child of yours has been enlightened by Christ. He is to walk always as the child of the light." It was in Baptism that Christ enlightened our life. We received it to illumine society, "Your light must shine before others that they may see the good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father." The light that we received is kept burning only if we feed them with the sacraments, and with our relationship with God.

The problem in our society is that many times people believe that they are the source of light. So instead of feeding the light of their hearts with God, they feed them with their own ideas, ideologies and views of the world, which have nothing to do either with the Bible or with Christianity. In such cases, the light of Christ in their heart dies slowly and imperceptibly. As a result, instead of being light of the world, they become darkness. How sad and terrible it is to see the anti-testimony of those people who do not do good works, but instead, they are dedicated to oppress the poor and to bully the weak. People who destroy the reputation of others by gossiping, or by acting poorly behind their backs. The first reading reminds us: "If you remove from your midst oppression, false accusation and malicious speech; then light shall rise for you in the darkness, and the gloom shall become for you like midday."

Today the Lord is inviting us to understand the great mission that he gave us: to be the light of the world. Psalm 112 says, "The just man is a light in darkness to the upright. Light shines through the darkness for the upright. Well for the man who is gracious and lends, who conducts his affairs with justice. Lavishly he gives to the poor. His justice shall endure forever." The psalm says that to enlighten the world we must do good works. The first reading from the prophet Isaiah also tells us, "Share your bread with the hungry, shelter the oppressed and the homeless; clothe the naked when you see them, and do not turn your back on your own brother." St. John Chrysostom also said, "The person characterized by humility, gentleness, mercy and righteousness does not build a fence around good deeds. Rather, he ensures that these good fountains overflow for the benefit of others."

A final note. Jesus tells us "your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father." "It is a human tendency to want to appear more intelligent, kinder and more respectable than we really are. We live our lives trying to hide our failings in order to pretend before others and ourselves to have a perfection we do not possess.³" We do not do good works to boast before others but to give glory to God. St. Augustine said, "The saying 'Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works' is incomplete. Jesus immediately adds the reason why this should be done, 'that they may give glory to your Father who is in heaven.' This means that even though one is seen by others in doing good works, in one's conscience one must have the simple intention of glorifying God. It is only for the sake of God's glory."⁴

St. Paul exhorts us today, "Once you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of the light (for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true). Try to learn what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful words of darkness, but instead expose them... Look carefully

³ Pagola, J. A. (2010). *Following in the Footsteps of Jesus: Meditations on the Gospels for Year A*. (R. Luciani, Ed., V. de Souza, Trans.) (p. 91). Miami, FL: Convivium Press.

⁴ Simonetti, M. (Ed.). (2001). *Matthew 1–13* (pp. 94–95). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

then how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil" (Eph 5:8–11, 15–16; cf. 1 Th 5:4–8).