

Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time - A

Holy Rosary Cathedral

4 February 2017

Dear brother priests and deacons, students and staff from colleges and universities around the Archdiocese, young people: brothers and sisters in Christ:

Introduction

It is always a great pleasure to celebrate with you this now Annual University Mass, and I thank you especially for the extra effort it involved tonight because of the harsh weather conditions. Unfortunately, a good many of our colleagues couldn't make it through the snow. But you are a hardy lot in body, mind and spirit.

At this Eucharist we gather to praise the Lord together and to recognize our common vocation as those involved in higher education. As believers, we are called to let the radiant light of the truth and beauty of the Gospel of Jesus Christ shine on our learning, research and work. Although I have spent many years on campuses as a student, faculty member and administrator, you still know better than I do the demanding but exciting challenges that confront those on campus who take their faith seriously and who want it to be relevant to what they are studying, how they are living and discerning the vocation that they will embrace on their journey through life.

Word of the Gospel

This Sunday's Gospel passage from the Sermon on the Mount

comes immediately after Jesus' proclamation of the Beatitudes. As a kind of conclusion, he says, not to the crowd but to his disciples: "You are the salt of the earth You are the light of the world" (Mt 5:13,14). Why these compliments and challenges? Probably because what he's saying is this: *if* you are poor in spirit, if you are meek, if you are pure of heart, if you are merciful. . . you will be the salt of the earth and the light of the world!¹

Jesus is inviting his followers to a deeper discipleship by using two simple metaphors: one involving salt and the other, light. With these richly evocative images he wishes to tell us something about our mission and our witness.

Let's look now more closely at what it means for us, especially as students, to be "the salt of the earth" (Mt 5:13) and "the light of the world" (Mt 5:14).

Salt of the Earth

In ancient times, just as today, a main reason for using salt was to season food, to enhance its taste and flavour. Furthermore, it served as an important preservative. Jesus, then, was expressing his desire that his disciples do at least two things: give zest to the world through his teaching and preserve without contamination or the truth he proclaimed. "Both salt and light are for others, not for oneself: salt does not give flavor to

¹ Cf. Francis, Angelus (9 February 2014).

itself; light does not illuminate itself.”²

Give zest to the world

Salt enhances the flavour of something else. When it is used well, we don't even taste it. There is a lesson here for how we are to proclaim the Gospel to our friends and colleagues. When we do so “with salt,” so to speak, we do so with both conviction and with gentleness, taking into account who our listener, our partner in dialogue is, remembering that “all those who receive it do so with their distinctive features, like different foods [being salted]”³ Of course, it is always the same Gospel we preach – the healing power of God's love and mercy as manifested in “Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2) – as we heard in today's second reading of St. Paul writing to the Corinthians. But we make known this Good News in such a way that it can flavour the “food” – the real life of the listener and their concrete situation.

At World Youth Day in Toronto, Pope St. John Paul II addressed the young people at Downsview – perhaps some of you were there? – with this challenge: “Following Jesus, you have to change and improve the ‘taste’ of human history. With your faith, hope and love, with your intelligence, courage and perseverance, you have to humanize the world we live in.”⁴

² Francis, Morning Meditation (7 June 2016).

³ Francis, Morning Meditation (23 May 2013).

⁴ St. John Paul II, Homily, Closing Mass for World Youth Day, Toronto (28 July

If, on the other hand, we do not transmit the flavour which the Lord has given to us, the Gospel, then we have nothing to say that will touch others.

The Lord warns his disciples that, like salt, they can lose their ability to flavour; they can lose their ability to inspire the world with the liberating message of the Gospel by their laziness or unwillingness to live as true disciples. Too many people fear that Jesus might ask too much of them, that he might impose on their free time, “as though the task of evangelization was a dangerous poison rather than a joyful response to God’s love which summons us to mission and makes us fulfilled and productive.”⁵

Preserve the truth

More than just adding flavour, for millennia salt has also been used as a preservative, to prevent spoiling. Likewise, the task of today’s disciples “is to preserve and keep alive the awareness of the presence of our Saviour Jesus Christ.”⁶ We each have a responsibility to keep alive the memory of Christ’s words of life and his marvellous works of mercy, especially his Death and Resurrection. As the salt of the earth, we are called to preserve the faith which we have received and to pass it on intact to others.

2002), 4.

⁵ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 81.

⁶ St. John Paul II, Homily at World Youth Day, Toronto (28 July 2002), 4.

Light of the World

Light is a symbol of the triumph of faith over the darkness of unbelief. Think of the Easter Vigil. Jesus calls his followers to be the light of the world. What a privilege! He who proclaimed himself light of the world (cf. Jn 8:12) has the confidence to hand over *his* light to those who follow him, to you: “You are the light of the world” (Mt 5:14). “Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life” (Jn 8:12).

But being the “light of the world” is actually more of a challenge than a consolation. It calls us to go forth, not to hide in the comfort zone of our own circle of friends and colleagues. As Christians, we should be luminous, bringing light and giving off light! And this light is not our own, but a gift from God received in Baptism.⁷

We must be visible in our witness. We are meant to draw others to the Lord. Invisibility is not a mark of the Christian or of the Church. Why else would Jesus say, “let your light shine before human beings, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven?” (Mt 5:16). This does not mean that we do good works for the sake of being seen. Nor are we different just for the sake of being different.⁸

What is the first light that others can see at work in us? The

⁷ Cf. Francis, Angelus (9 February 2014).

⁸ Cf. Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), 62-63.

Prophet Isaiah reminds us that it is not merely external worship but interior sincerity. Isaiah tells us what the Lord demands of us: that we loose the bonds of injustice, undo the yoke, let the oppressed go free, share our bread with the hungry, bring the homeless into our dwellings, cover the naked and pay attention to the needs of their families (cf. Is 58:6-7). If we do these things, the Prophet says, “Then your light shall break forth like the dawn . . . then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom will be like the noonday” (Is 58:8,10). This is what it means to be the light of the world!

We are called to attract others to the Lord, not repel them. Our faith should give pause to the skeptic, our hope lend heart to the disheartened, our love cool the anger of those who resent and hate.⁹ But we attract others to God – not to ourselves so that they like us, admire us or envy us. That’s the difference between a saint and a showman.

Blessed John Henry Cardinal Newman composed a beautiful prayer, “Radiating Christ,” in which he implores the Lord to enable our light to shine before others. Here’s an excerpt:

Dear Jesus, . . . Penetrate and possess my whole being so utterly that all my life may only be a radiance of Thine. Shine through me, and be so in me that every soul I come in contact with may feel Thy presence in my soul. Let them look up

⁹ Cf. Walter J. Burghardt, *Grace on Crutches: Homilies for Fellow Travelers* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1986), 156.

and see no longer me but only Jesus! Stay with me, and then I shall begin to shine as Thou shinest, so to shine as to be a light to others; the light, o Jesus, will be all from Thee; none of it will be mine; it will be Thou shining on others through me.¹⁰

Conclusion

As we continue Mass now, just remember this: you are missionary disciples on your campuses and places of work, each one called to become a living Gospel to the world around you. Like the Apostle Paul, you might go out “in weakness and in fear and in much trembling” (1 Cor 2:3), but the message of God’s love that you are and that you bring rests not on human wisdom but on the power of God at work within you (cf. 1 Cor 2:5). And that power is strengthened and nourished in you through this celebration of the Eucharist.

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¹⁰ Cited in Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 93.