

Homily for Septuagesima – 2023 - Salt of the Earth and Light of the World.

On the eve of his crucifixion, our Lord prayed for his disciples . . . and for you and me. He said: “*Father, I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world*” Jn 17:15-16. There are times when we might all wish that Jesus might have prayed differently. But he didn’t. And he won’t. Therefore, although we are not “of” this world, we are still “in” it, and that is by God’s design. God has chosen not to deliver his people from their responsibilities on this earth. So what, then, is our responsibility to this world? What role, if any, is the Christian to play in society?

Radically different answers are given to that question. Some insist that we are here to *transform* society, whether through political or social activism. Our duty, so goes the argument, is to alleviate racial bigotry, eliminate poverty, deliver the oppressed, and do whatever else is necessary to rid the earth of injustice and inequity. Others argue that in view of the moral and spiritual decay of society, we must *withdraw*. “Why polish brass on a sinking ship?” Neither of these answers is of much help.

Incredible as it may seem, Jesus describes a handful of Palestinian peasants and fishermen as the salt of the earth and the light of the world! In these two metaphors we find our Lord’s description of our role as Christians in human society. Jesus provides us with a broad outline of our obligations to the people and institutions around us when He says: “*You are the salt of the earth You are the light of the world.*”

What Jesus says here would be meaningless except for the fact that the Christian and the world are quite distinct. “On the one hand there is ‘the earth’; on the other there is ‘us’ who are the earth’s salt. On the one hand there is ‘the world’; on the other there is ‘us’ who are the world’s light” Unless we are distinct from the world in such a way that the world knows it, what Jesus says will profit little.

In other words, this text is telling us to be what, if we are honest, none of us wants to be: that is: different (not odd, strange, weird, or quirky, but morally and

spiritually different). It is also telling us to do what none of us wants to do: that is: stand out in a crowd. By nature we don't want to be the salt of the earth; we want to be the earth! We don't want to be the light of the world; it's much easier and safer to be the world!

These two metaphors also tell us a great deal about the world itself. It is rotten to the core, ever on the path to deterioration. In addition, it is in utter darkness, blinded to the truth. For all of its pompous claims to be “enlightened” and “progressive”, the world is in fact both darkened and putrefied. It is in a world that is decaying, therefore, that Christians are to be salt, and in a world that languishes in darkness that Christians are to be light.

In the ancient world, salt served primarily as a *preservative*. Salt was essential to prevent meat from decaying. If this is what Jesus meant, the point would be that Christians are to serve as a *deterrent* to the moral and spiritual deterioration and decay of the world. A Christian is to make the world around him/her less fertile for sin. In a world where moral standards are low, constantly changing, or non-existent, we are to live in such a way that we reduce the frequency of sin not only in our own lives but also in the lives of others. The most fundamental way in which “Christian saltiness” is manifested is in our living out the beatitudes day by day.

Jesus calls us to be the light of the world. Now, we are only the light by derivation. Jesus is the only real light of the world. We are light because we are in him. He is the sun, as it were, and we are the moon who reflect his presence and power. In his absence we are but sinful shadows.

For people in the ancient world who knew nothing of electricity, this metaphor probably had greater impact than it does on us today. Our Lord's point is that “light” is worthless if it is not visible and he gives two examples.

1. *A city set on a hill* – His point is that we, his followers, are that city! We are not tiny villages nestled away in a valley, obscure and little noticed. We are set atop a hill, a city whose light signals its presence for miles around.

2. *A lamp* - No one in his right mind lights a lamp only to hide the light he has lit. Did God redeem us, shed the light of his Spirit in our hearts, only then to cover us over in the darkness of silence and passivity?

How, then, should we shine as lights?

We are to expose darkness and error: denounce it, reveal it, separate from it.

By our works of compassion and mercy to those outside the church we shed abroad the light of Christ's love and grace.

We do so also by our works of compassion and mercy to those inside the church.

Tertullian wrote in 200AD, "*But it is mainly the deeds of a love so noble that lead many to put a brand upon us. 'See,' they say, 'how they love one another.'*"

We do so by our spoken witness: evangelism. A secret, silent Christian is as incongruous as hidden light.

Our calling is to walk as the children of light and exhibit the fruit of light, which is all things found in what is good, right, and true. All of us must look carefully how we walk, being wise in our life and making the best use of our time because we are light. We do not live like the world. We do not make purchases like the world. We do not party like the world. We do not live for the weekend like the world. We will not be immoral like the world.

Our worldliness and desiring to look like the world is how we put our light that God has given us under a basket. We cannot be the revelation of God to people in the world and show them the light of Christ when we are doing what they are doing, talking like they are talking, loving the world like they love the world, and behaving like they behave.

As the darkness continues to grow in our culture it is all the more imperative that we shine as lights and be distinct. We will influence with graciousness in our words and actions and shine with our good deeds, pointing the way to Jesus.

Our good works are to be the shining of the light to the world so that they can see the way to God. We shine so that people can see God, not us. We must point to Jesus whenever we do good for this is true righteousness.

Let us end by going beyond just thinking about doing good deeds for people. Being salt and light means not acting like the world around us. We simply cannot live corrupt, worldly lives. But let us go beyond this also. Being the salt of the earth and the light of the world means that everything we do is for the glory of God. Do people look at everything we do, big and little things, and see God glorified? That is what it means to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. We are called to live such radical lives that make people want to know God. We are to exercise a double influence on the world. *Negatively*, we are to be a deterrent to sin, retarding the decay of moral and spiritual standards. *Positively*, we are to be agents through which the light of Christ shines. It is one thing to stop the spread of evil; it is another to promote the spread of truth and goodness. As God's people we are called to do both.