

Homily for the Fifth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year A) (09/02/20)

Jesus has called his first followers, and with them at his side he has travelled around Galilee teaching, preaching and healing. Something about him has electrified the people, and a larger and larger crowd have begun to follow him. So, now he sits on a mountainside, where the people can see and hear him, and he teaches them. He sets out a programme for the new kind of life which he is living, for the new way of relating to other people that he is modeling for them to see. He gives them an insight into life lived to the full: Blessed are the poor in Spirit...’ He speaks to them the beatitudes, the characteristics of the Blessed person. And then, as soon as he has finished that, he speaks the words of today’s Gospel reading. They come near the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, straight after the Beatitudes. This is not a coincidence. Jesus is saying: ‘Here is a programme for a better and truer sort of life; and if you live that sort of life, if you live by the Beatitudes, even just a little bit, then you will become salt for the earth and light for the world’.

The purpose of salt is not to make food taste salty; if it does that, something has gone badly wrong. The purpose is to make food taste more strongly and truly of itself, to heighten its taste. In a similar way, the purpose of light is not simply to make everything much brighter, it is to reveal everything as it really is. If you go to a gallery to look at a painting, there is a light shining on it in such a way as to help you see the painting in all its true colour, and all its true depth. The light is not there to attract attention to itself but to reveal the reality of the painting, or whatever else it is shining on. Salt and light are not there to draw attention to themselves, to make us say ‘that’s salty’ or ‘that’s bright’; they are there to make us say ‘that’s tasty’ or ‘that’s clear’. The role of the Church, and of us as individual followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, is to reveal to the world its true nature, to help people see what they could become and then, having revealed this, to help them achieve it.

Tuesday of this week is the Feast of Our Lady of Lourdes, which for many years has been kept as World Day of Prayer for the Sick. Each year the Pope writes a message for this day, and this year Pope Francis has said that in their sickness the ill need to find a place of rest; that is to say a place where they can be listened to, loved, appreciated, valued and given time. He goes on to write:

“The Church desires to become more and more the “inn” of the Good Samaritan who is Christ (cf. Lk 10:34), that is, a home where you can encounter his grace, which finds expression in closeness, acceptance and relief. In this home, you can meet people who, healed in their frailty by God’s mercy, will help you bear your cross and enable your suffering to give you a new perspective.”

This is one example of the way in which the Church seeks to be salt for the earth and light for the world. Our brothers and sisters who are sick experience a whole range of spiritual and moral challenges, quite apart from the challenge of illness itself. They feel isolation: isolation from the life that was familiar, and isolation

from the future that they planned and expected; isolation from their friends and work colleagues, whose lives carry on without them as they are removed from the familiar life by their illness and its treatment; perhaps even isolation from their families, too. They may feel a sense of loss on many different levels, and in our society which often values fitness, ability and productivity they may feel that they are almost less human. The Church is the Inn from the story of the Good Samaritan, the place where the sick can come to experience a rest from these feelings of isolation, loss and reduced value. Here they can take a break from the therapies and the treatments, and find people who will just love and accept them for what and who they are, not for what they can do. The Church's mission to the sick is one very important part of its call to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. The annual celebration of World Day of Prayer for the Sick is a good moment for us to stop each year and ask ourselves, as the local Church, if we are doing this as well as we should, or if there are new practices or initiatives that we need to take up to be a better, safer, more restful and more healing 'Inn'.

As I mentioned last Sunday, we have a very different view of light to that of our forebears. We flick a switch and the room is ablaze. If the only light that you have, however, is an oil lamp it is a very different matter. We need to fill the lamp with oil, and trim the wick so that it is able to give out the best light possible. Then we need to find the place in the room where the lamp gives the best light: so that the things that need to be lit are lit, and none of them is left in the shadows. This might take a bit of experimentation. It is a lifetime's work to allow ourselves to become salt for the earth and light for the world. We need to learn how to be filled, and trimmed and used best. In the end, in fact, we need to hand ourselves over to the Lord who is light. If we really want to be a source of life that shines in all the places most in need of light, we have to allow the Lord to move us, use us and place us as he sees fit. Fill us with your Spirit, Lord, so that we can truly long to bring light to the world, to reveal to it what it can still become; trim us so that nothing stands in the way, nothing darkens the light of your love which we are called to allow to shine from us; and place us where you need us most, so that 'seeing our good works, people may give praise to our Father in heaven'.