

Commentary on the Readings 5th Sunday in Ordinary Time – February 9, 2020

How Could One Become Salt And Light?



Introduction

“Today, there is no more faith. Once there was so much.”

How do you measure faith? Referring to statistics, do you count how many are those who participate in Sunday Mass, receive the sacraments, marry in the Church, send their children to catechism? Is it perhaps assessed by the imposing crowds involved in ecclesial gatherings? How does one know when it increases and decreases? Is it in solemn celebrations, attentive to the minute details and executed flawlessly, that Christians appear to be the salt of the earth and light of the world?

A wonderful parable of Jesus (Mt 25:31-46) reveals how God’s way of evaluating is different from ours. Instead of paying attention to religious practices, loyalty to the traditions, the scrupulous observance of rites, God is interested in concrete adhesion to his plan of love for people. Those who share their bread with the hungry and water with the thirsty, who dress the naked and house the homeless, assist the sick and defend those who suffer injustice shine in the world as beautiful rays of

God's light.

The criteria are clear and yet many continue to reduce their relationship with God to a scrupulous fulfillment of religious practices. One day, this could prove to be a tragic illusion. Only the life of the righteous, that of one who believes in the Beatitudes proposed by Jesus, is "like the light of dawn: it grows in splendor until noon" (Pro 4:18).

To internalize the message, we repeat:

"He is the light who breaks the bread with the hungry, welcomes the homeless in the house, dresses the naked, frees the oppressed."

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First Reading: Isaiah 58:7-10

The practice of fasting is known to all peoples. Since ancient times one fasted when confronted with situations of dangers or struck by misfortunes, when hail or locusts destroyed the crops and when the rains were late. This voluntary sacrifice was intended to move God, appease him, and get him to put an end to his punishments. During the fasting days, they wore torn clothes, anointed the head with dust and ashes, renounced sexual intercourse, took no bath, were barefooted, and slept on the floor.

The reading today is placed in the context of one of these moments of fasting. We are in the fifth century B.C., the postexilic period. The people return from Babylon, but the promises made by the prophets are slow to be realized. Instead of the long-awaited peaceful community, a society dominated by careerists and profiteers is established. Violence, harassment, and discord are everywhere. To convince God to step in and remedy the situation, a rigorous and severe national fasting is recommended.

Nothing changes, everything continues as before, and to many, suspicion pervades that the practice of fasting is ineffective. One wonders, why fast if the Lord does not listen and it is as if we were not subjected to humiliations and sacrifices?

Today's reading gives an answer to this question.

The fault of the failure of change—says the prophet—is not of the Lord, but the wrong way of fasting, which is reduced to a sterile self-punishment, a painful penance. This fast does not get any result because it subjects the body to hardships but does not change the heart.

True fasting that produces prodigious effects consists of sharing one's bread with the hungry, sheltering the homeless, giving clothes to the naked, not taking one's eyes off from persons who, like us—our own flesh, although different in the color of skin and have different culture and religion—live alongside us in inhumane conditions (v. 7).

This new behavior produces miracles: in a short time, it heals the wounds of society, solves difficult situations, creates fraternal rapports and gives birth to a community where justice and the glory of God

shine (v. 8).

In the second part of the reading (vv. 9-10), another characteristic of true fasting is shown: the commitment to get rid of all forms of oppression, the pointing of a finger, and speaking arrogantly. It is not enough to do charity and almsgiving. It is necessary to put an end to all the attitudes of ambitious superiority that cause humiliation, injustice, and discrimination.

After this new clarification, the prophet resumes, with an almost excessive insistence, the issue of sharing of bread. He wants the people to assimilate the interest, concern, and solicitude of God to those who are hungry.

The conclusion of the reading introduces the theme of light that will be taken up in the Gospel: if you practice this new justice “your light will shine in the darkness, and your gloom will become like midday.”

The Israelites believed themselves to be the light of the world because of their devotion to God and impeccable religious practice: solemn liturgies, hymns and prayers, sacrifices and burnt offerings. This was not the worship pleasing to the Lord. These were not the works that would make Israel light of the world, but the practice of justice and love to people.

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 2:1-5

The Christians of Corinth—as we pointed out last Sunday—did not belong to the upper social classes. They were all of humble origins, people who are not counted in society (1Cor 1:26). This fact is interpreted by Paul as a sign of God’s preference for the despised and unmerited people.

His choice, however, should not be understood as a reversal of class (it would be a new discrimination), but as a logical consequence of the love of God. He does not love one who boasts of merits, but one who needs his love.

In today’s passage, the apostle takes up and develops this theme by comparing human wisdom and the power of God. He brings forward the concrete example of his person.

He begins with a reminder of his preaching (vv. 1-2). He did not present himself in Corinth to teach a new doctrine. If he had done so, he would need to possess the “sublimity of language and wisdom.” In Greece wisdom and skills were appreciated—as Plato said—to “investigate the truth as true; the care of the soul sustained by right reason.” Every speech devoid of support of rational demonstration and prestigious resources of philosophers’ thoughts was ridiculed and considered the result of ignorance, gullibility, and naive religiosity.

In this cultural context, Paul has announced a humanly absurd message: he asked them to believe in the project of life made by an executed man.

It was not just the content of his preaching that was outrageous. His very own person—weak, fearful, unable to speak—was the least appropriate to successfully carry out such a large mission (vv. 3-5). In this regard, a joke circulated among the Corinthians that had provoked a resentful reaction of the

apostle. “His letters—it was said—are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his ability to make speeches is modest” (2Cor 10:10).

Paul was conscious of his lack of oratory skills. He had had a demonstration in Athens when he tried unsuccessfully to convince the listeners by resorting to the sublime language of the philosophers (Acts 17:16-34). A year later, at Troas, he had the reconfirmation: during his sermon, a young man had fallen asleep and fell from the window (Acts 20:9).

Despite this lack of human support, the Gospel had been widely circulated in Corinth. Why? You may ask. It is because—says Paul—the Word of God is strong in itself and its penetration into the heart of persons does not depend on human means, but by the “demonstration of the Spirit and his power.” The apostle does not refer to miracles that would have convinced the Corinthians to accept the Gospel. He refers to the fruit of the spirit: the new form of life that, while in the midst of human weakness and misery, had been adopted by many members of the community.

Gospel: Matthew 5:13-16

In today’s Gospel, Jesus uses a series of images to define the disciples and their mission. He shows them primarily as the salt of the earth (v. 13).

The rabbis of Israel used to say: “The Torah—the holy Law given by God to his people—is like salt and the world cannot live without salt.” Taking up this image and applying it to the disciples, Jesus knows how to use an expression that may sound provocative. He does not deny the conviction of his people who believed the sacred Scriptures as “salt of the earth,” but says that also his disciples are, if they assimilate his word and let themselves be guided by the wisdom of his beatitudes.

Salt has many functions and Jesus probably intended to refer to all. The first and most immediate is that of giving flavor to foods. Since ancient times, salt has become the symbol of “wisdom.” Even today it is said that a person has “salt in his head” when he speaks wisely, or that a conversation has “no salt” when it is boring, devoid of content. Paul knows this symbolism. In fact, he recommends to the Colossians: “Let your conversation be always pleasant, seasoned with salt” (Col 4:6).

Understood as such, the image indicates that the disciples must bring to the world a wisdom capable of giving flavor and meaning to life. Without the knowledge of the Gospel, what sense would life, joys and sorrows, smiles and tears, celebrations and mourning be? What dreams and hopes could nourish humans on this earth? It would be difficult to go beyond those suggested by Ecclesiastes: “It is better to eat, drink and enjoy the good things in the few days of life that God gives: this is the fate of man” (Ecl 5:17).

One who is imbued with the mind of Christ savors instead other joys, introduces experiences of new and ineffable happiness into the world, and offers to people the possibility of experiencing the same bliss of God.

Salt is not only used to give flavor to foods. It is also used to preserve food, to prevent them from becoming damaged.

This fact recalls the moral corruption of associating ideas with negative forces and evil spirits. Against them, the ancient Orientals fortify themselves by using salt. It is in this naïve belief that even today the ritual of spreading salt to immunize from the wicked and evil is connected.

The Christian is the salt of the earth: with one's presence one is called upon to prevent corruption, not to allow society guided by wicked principles to rot and go into decay. It's not difficult to see, for example, that, where no one reminds or presents the Gospel values, debauchery, hatred, violence, and oppression propagate. In a world where the inviolability of human life from its beginning to its natural end is doubted, the Christian believer is salt that reminds of its sacredness. Where sexuality, cohabitation, and adultery are trivialized, they are no longer called by their names. There the Christian reminds of the holiness the man-woman rapport and God's plan for marital love. Where one seeks one's own advantage, the disciple is salt that preserves, always recalling everyone the heroic proposal, the gift of self.

Salt was also used to confirm the inviolability of the pacts: the contractors were making the ritual of eating together bread and salt or salt only. This solemn agreement was called "covenant of salt." The everlasting covenant stipulated by God with the dynasty of David (2Chr 13:5) is called by this name.

Christians are the salt of the earth also in this sense. We witness the indefectibility of God's love: They show that no sin will ever damage the covenant of loyalty that binds God to people. They, with their lives, give proof that it is possible for people to respond to this love by letting themselves be guided by the Spirit.

The "parable" of the salt ends with a call to the disciples not to become "tasteless." The image assumes a rather surprising connotation: the chemists ensure that salt is imperishable, and yet Jesus warns the disciples against the danger of losing their flavor. Although it may seem strange, Jesus considers them to be able to do something absurd, impossible, as ruining the salt. They can make the Gospel lose its flavor.

There's only one way to make this mess: mix salt with another material that would affect its purity and genuineness. The Gospel has its own taste and one has to let it not be denaturalized, or else it is no longer Gospel.

The parable of the salt is told immediately after the "Beatitudes." The Christian is salt if one accepts in full the proposals of the Master, without additions, changes, without the "however," "if" and "but" with which one tries to soften them, to make them less demanding, and more workable.

For example, Jesus says that there is a need to share one's assets, to turn the other cheek, to forgive seventy times seven. This is the characteristic taste of the salt of the Gospel. However, the temptation for us to add a bit of "common sense" looms always. One must not overdo but must also think of oneself. If one forgives others too much, they take advantage. One should not resort to violence unless it is necessary. It is in this way that the Gospel is "sweetened" and becomes viable, but it loses its flavor. It is the failure of the mission, stated metaphorically with the image of salt thrown on the street: it is trampled, as the dust to which no one pays attention or attaches any value.

The second function assigned to the disciples is that of being a city set on a hill (v. 14).

Even today, the look of one who walks the streets of Upper Galilee is attracted by the numerous villages, located on the tops of mountains and along the densely wooded hills. It is impossible not to notice them, and especially in spring, when the crimson anemones covering the countryside around them, seem delightful. The archaeological excavations almost always prove that the summits, on which they arise, were inhabited since the most remote times.

Jesus grew up in one of these villages. He pointed them to the disciples as an image of their mission. With their life based on new principles, they will draw the attention of the world.

It is not an invitation to make them noticed, to show off. Such an attitude would contradict the exhortation not to practice good deeds before people, to be seen, and not to sound a trumpet to call attention when they give alms (Mt 6:1-2).

The call of Jesus is in a famous passage from Isaiah where it is announced that the mountain of the house of the Lord “shall be set over the highest mountains and shall tower over the hills. All the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples will come because from Jerusalem the word of the Lord will come out” (Is 2:2-5).

From now on—Jesus ensures—that people will no longer look to Jerusalem but to the community of his disciples. They will attract the admiring glances of people if they have the courage to set their lives on his beatitudes.

Connected to the image of the mountain is that of light (vv. 14-16).

The rabbis said, “As oil brings light to the world, so Israel is the light of the world” and also “Jerusalem is light for the nations of the earth.” They were referring to the fact that Israel believed itself the depositary of the wisdom of the law that God, by the mouth of Moses, had revealed to his people.

A certain rabbi had an insight that not only the words of Holy Scripture but also the works of mercy were light. He claimed that the first order was given by God at the beginning of creation: “Let there be light!” referred not to a material light but to the works of the righteous.

Calling his disciples “light of the world” Jesus declares that the mission entrusted by God to Israel was destined to continue through them. It would have appeared in all its glory in their works of concrete, verifiable love. These are works that Jesus recommends to “show.” He does not want his disciples to limit themselves in proclaiming his word without engaging, compromising themselves and without committing their lives on this word.

The proof that people have been caught by this light will be when they give glory to the Father who is in heaven.

Their reaction, however, could also be the opposite and unexpected. They might get annoyed by the good works of the Christians.

One should not immediately assume that this is due to their malevolent disposition. Generally, it is not

the good works that disturb them but the perception with some shades of exhibitionism, ambition, vanity, and self-satisfaction. These smudges unconsciously, even with the noblest intentions, deprive the good works of the most exquisite, sublime and divine feature: the sweet smell of apathy and total freedom.

The disciples are called to do good without expecting any praise, admiration, “their right hand should not know what the left is doing” (Mt 6:3). Praises should not be addressed to them but to God.

The last image is delightful: we are introduced to the humble home of an upper Galilee peasant where a lamp of clay in oil is lighted. It is put on an iron stand and placed on top so that it can illuminate even the most hidden corners of the house. No one would think of hiding it under a bowl.

The invitation is not to conceal, to veil the most challenging parts of the Gospel message. The disciples do not have to worry to defend or justify the proposals of Jesus. They just announce it, without fear of being ridiculed or persecuted. It will be for people as a lamp “shining in a dark place until the break of day, when the morning star shines in your hearts” (2 P 1:19).

READ: Your light must shine before others, so that they may see the good you do and praise your Father in heaven.

REFLECT: Think about the images that Jesus uses: salt, light, a city set on a mountain. We are made and meant to shine! Believe in the light of God in us. By living just and upright lives, we manifest the brightness and beauty of God.

PRAY: Let us get in touch with the light of God in us. Savor the peace and tranquility of living in the light. Let it radiate in our lives and that of others.

ACT: Let us express the joy we experience of living in the light of God. Share a smile and see how we all shine.

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Fr. Fernando Armellini