

Homily for the 5th Sunday in Ordinary Time

February 5, 2023

St. Bavo Parish

Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.

First Reading: Isaiah 58:7-10 (Then your light shall break forth like the dawn.)

Responsory: Psalm 112 (The just man is a light in darkness to the upright.)

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 2:1-5 (Paul's proclamation rests on the power of God, not human wisdom.)

Gospel: Matthew 5:13-16 (Your light must shine before others.)

We Christians should always pay special attention to this type of gospel passage, in which Jesus speaks to his disciples about what role they should play in the world and how they should carry out their mission as disciples and apostles. We should recognize that everything he says to *them* also applies to *us*. So, in this case, his exhortation to them should motivate us, and his warnings to them should give us pause.

Jesus begins his instruction by telling his disciples that they are “the salt of the earth.” That sounds encouraging, doesn’t it? I think all of us strive to be a positive influence in the world. We certainly want to be a force for good, and not for evil, for all the people with whom we come in contact. That seems to be what Jesus is implying by that phrase, “salt of the earth.” Salt, when used properly to season food, doesn’t stand out as a distinct flavor, but it makes all the other flavors come alive. So it should be with us. We shouldn’t seek to be the center of attention, but rather, we should want to be facilitators who lift up others and help them to be the best that they can be. All of us are capable of being “salt” for others, in that sense. We just need to be consistently *other*-centered, rather than *self*-centered.

On the other hand, Jesus’ warning about salt going flat is a bit disconcerting. None of us wants to think of ourselves as so useless to the Lord that we will be thrown out and trampled underfoot. Even more troubling, salt that has gone flat *was* useful at one time. This is not an image for a disciple-in-name-only, who was never really committed to the Lord. The salt that goes flat is a disciple who starts out highly motivated and then loses interest somewhere along the way. So, it appears that Jesus is trying to point out the danger of *complacency* in the Christian life. We might ponder what tools we have at our disposal to ward off such complacency and maintain an active spirit of Christian charity. The sacraments of Eucharist and Reconciliation are obviously key supports. So is regular private prayer and spiritual reading. There are many ways to keep our spiritual salt savory for the long-term.

Jesus also tells his disciples that they are the “light of the world.” That sounds quite similar to the salt metaphor. Both images clearly imply that Jesus means for us to have a positive impact on other people. But, the light metaphor can convey a wider variety of meanings, because light can serve so many different functions. It can reveal, inspire, guide or expose. Most of us are more comfortable being certain types of light, and less comfortable being other types.

The Prophet Isaiah makes it sound very easy. He says, “If you remove from your midst oppression, false accusation and malicious speech; if you bestow your bread on the hungry and

satisfy the afflicted; then light shall rise for you in the darkness, and the gloom shall become for you like midday.” So, according to Isaiah, our light will shine primarily through *acts of mercy and kindness*, and through *avoidance of injustice and malice*. We can all do those things. Being that sort of light seems within the reach of every Christian. But, other types are not so simple.

For example, all Catholic parents have surely heard that they are the primary religious educators of their children. They understand their obligation to be a *light* for their children, by illuminating their minds with sound doctrine and illuminating their path by offering a good example. But, what if you don’t have a very good religious education yourself? What if you lack the vocabulary or the understanding to explain concepts of faith to your children? And, what if you’ve made grave mistakes earlier in life, which you don’t want your children to imitate? How can you fulfill your obligation to raise them in the faith? Unfortunately, many Christian parents today don’t even try very hard to instill a deep and genuine faith in their children. Sometimes they claim that they want to allow their children to make their own decisions about religious practice when they are old enough. By then it will be too late. The opportunity will be lost. Children need and deserve a bright, shining lamp to guide them in the way of Christ, and Christian parents must take that responsibility very seriously.

Being a light of the world also implies another danger that’s not present in the salt metaphor. If you’re a light, then everybody can see you. Salt is meant to be inconspicuous; light is meant to stand out and be noticed. As Jesus said, you don’t light a lamp and then hide it under a bushel basket. You put it on a lampstand, where it gives light to all in the house. But, if people see our light, won’t they also see all our defects, which we would rather keep hidden? Even if people can’t see everything about us, it’s still a bit unnerving to think that people are looking to us as role models, when we know things about ourselves that are *not* worthy of imitation. We want to say, “Look at me and follow my example, but don’t look *too closely*, or you may see something to disappoint or even scandalize you.”

Maybe the most challenging aspect of being the light of the world is the obligation to be a *prophetic voice*, which promotes the Christian way of life. It’s not so hard to demonstrate our values by the way we live. But, sometimes we are also called upon to speak up for what is right and true. Sometimes we need to be a light that exposes the darkness to scrutiny and points out what is wrong in the world. Unfortunately, the people who most enjoy doing that sort of thing are the self-righteous folks, who would be wise to take a good, honest look at themselves first, before criticizing others. It’s more challenging for those who recognize their faults and feel the sting of hypocrisy even when they offer much needed critique. We need to be willing to offer that sort of light, when our insights and constructive criticism can be of service to others.

If we really want to be an effective “light of the world,” we need to remember who the *true source* of that light is. When people look at us and see the light of truth, justice, wisdom and virtue, they are seeing the *light of Christ* shining in us and through us. May we give glory to God by letting *his light* shine for all to see!