

## **Homily for 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A**

**By Fr. Jerome Ituah, OCD**

**Readings: Isa 58:7-10; Ps 111(112); 1 Cor 2:1-5; Matt 5:13-16**

**Theme: Being Salt and Light in the World**

Our gospel today follows immediately after the Beatitudes we heard last Sunday. The beatitudes are practised in this world not in heaven but with a view to gaining eternal life. So, Jesus immediately followed the beatitudes with the teaching of how to live them out using the analogies of salt and light. The listeners of Jesus knew the properties of salt and light very well. Israel's proximity to the Dead Sea and many salt pits made salt a readily accessible commodity (cf. Zeph 2:9). Salt was valued for many reasons: its flavouring; without salt, the food is tasteless (cf. Job 6:6); preservative, when rubbed on meat, it slows decay. Salt was also used for healing, especially for newborn babies (cf. Eze 16:4; 2 Kgs 2:21); for liturgical functions (cf. Lev 2:13; Eze 43:24). We add salt to the water when blessing water as Elisha poured salt in the sea to purify it and bring about healing (cf. 2 Kgs 2:20-21). Salt was also used in covenant-making (cf. Num 18:19; 2 Chr 13:5). Salt is scattered on the roads in snowy climates to lower the freezing temperature of water, thereby preventing ice and frost from forming on the roads. If the disciples lose their taste and flavour in the world, they will become irrelevant, discarded and undermined by people. Their presence must bring healing and blessing to people.

Jesus then said to his disciples; you are the light of the world. A city built on a hilltop cannot be hidden. Light shines, dispels darkness and helps people find their way. Just as a city on a hilltop cannot be hidden, and a lamp cannot be put under a basket, so the followers of Jesus, wherever they are, must shine out through their virtues for everyone to see. Jesus employs these two common elements to demonstrate how his followers should live their lives. Both metaphors of salt and light are meant to be felt and seen, not necessarily heard. Salt diffuses into water or food. It is not seen but felt. It gives taste and flavour. The effects of the followers of Jesus must be felt in the world even when they are not visible. Their legacies and impact must reflect in people's lives. While salt operates internally, light on the hand operates externally, radiating and shining for everyone to see. As followers of Jesus, we must possess both qualities of salt and light. We must not be loud in what we do. Yet, our presence must give light, hope and direction to people. Our good works reflect the light of Christ, and that is what draws people to God. When people see the life of Christians, they are transformed and give glory to God for the kind of people God has brought their way.

In our first reading post-exilic prophecy, Isaiah insists on inward religiosity rather than mere outward religious observances. The context centres around fasting, an external act of prolonged abstinence from food and drink. Fasting was linked with prayer and repentance, especially on the Day of Atonement. A few verses before our reading, the people complained that God had not responded to their fasting and prayer. Our reading offers God's response to the people. God is not interested in mere external acts for personal aggrandisement. Our religious acts must move us to share our bread with the hungry, shelter the homeless poor, and clothe the naked. These are the ways the people's light shines out and reveal the glory of God. Those who follow God must do away with the wickedness of words and actions by living a life of integrity. In other words, becoming what Jesus preaches in the gospel, becoming salt and light in the world.

St. Paul tells the Corinthians in the second reading not to depend on their knowledge of philosophy and rhetoric. Instead, they must rely on the power of God to live out the Christian faith. Suppose we must be salt, silently influencing the life of people and light, radiating to dispel the works of darkness in the world. In that case, we cannot but look up to Jesus and follow his life and example.