

Date 5/02/2023

Day: The 5th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A

Congregation: St Chad's, Linwood

First Reading: Isaiah 58: 1-12

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 2: 1-12

Gospel: Matthew 5: 13-20

These days salt doesn't always get the recognition it deserves. Due to the habit of many firms that produce processed food to add a lot of salt to enhance the flavour of their product, often we are reminded that we are consuming more than the daily amount needed for good health. And that can lead to a negative understanding of salt – that it is bad for us – and the negativity can cause us to forget just how necessary salt is for life and how its' lack can cause problems just as too much of it can.

Jesus' listeners didn't have that problem. Salt was an everyday product that had many uses – for the seasoning of food, the preservation of food, as a disinfectant or cleansing agent in medicine, as a ceremonial offering and also as a form of payment, such was its' value. So when Jesus talked about being the salt of the earth, his listeners would have been aware of the significance of

the metaphor that he used due to the importance of salt in their everyday lives.

This passage comes early in Jesus' ministry; he has endured his trial in the wilderness and emerged ready to follow God's call on his life. His disciples have been called and now he is teaching to all who come out to hear him. Jesus has just given his listener the Beatitudes and now goes on to outline the responsibility and cost of living out those 'Blessed are....' statements. And what he says about the salt and the light will have resonated with many of these people who felt that their lives were shallow and paid lip service to God without any deeper meaning or purpose. After all, they had come out seeking something that their religion was not satisfying in their lives.

And Jesus is identifying their problem right here in his words about being salt of the earth and light to the world – and as he does so he echoes the sentiment of the prophet Isaiah from centuries before. We heard Isaiah addressing his people, didn't we, in the first reading. As the channel of God's words to the Israelites Isaiah is

chiding the people for their lip service to God. They observe the outward requirements of their religion but it is a shallow observance. Yes, they bow down to God, they fast, and they cover themselves with sack cloth and ashes. Having done that, they wonder why still feel distant from God, as if God takes no notice of their actions and gives them no credit for their abasement.

That can be a familiar feeling for us too. We do the things that we understand are the requirements of our faith; we attend church, we even come on the saddest day of the year – Good Friday – and we remember the real meaning of Christmas when others around us are ignoring the birth of Jesus altogether. But sometimes those things might not give us the feeling of love and security that we expect from our faith, causing us to wonder if God has taken any notice of what we have done.

To his people – and, down through the years to us – Isaiah makes it clear that there can be no feeling of unity with God if we are not properly in tune with God's purpose. The people of ancient Israel were not being sincere in bowing before God and fasting if, once

they had done that, they went back to oppressing and quarrelling with others. They were not aligned with God's purpose if they failed to care for the hungry and the homeless after they had covered themselves with sackcloth and ashes.

Isaiah was explaining that God valued actions and words that showed love for others. Yes, bowing before God in acknowledgement of God's power and love is understandable and acceptable, (after all, it is an outpouring of the gratitude and love we feel) but that same love must then be shown to others when we go back out into the world. If not, what value can be placed on their worship? Remember the words from the first reading: *Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?"*

In Paul's letter to the people of Corinth he speaks of sharing faith not through the eloquence of his words (though we know from his

writings that he could be very eloquent) but of relying on the power of the Holy Spirit working through him. He wanted people to see God working through him, not just Paul in his human weakness.

When people live out God's wishes in the way in which they care for others, share the blessings they have with others, and ensuring that justice is done for all people, then light shines forth. When we act according to the faith we have in the everyday world and not just pay lip service in church on Sundays, then – as both Isaiah and Jesus say – we can know that God sees our actions and will support us and act to help us when we need it. We are then working with God, partners in the mission to bring light and salt to the world. Salt is a most necessary ingredient for life in a physical sense. It is also a fitting metaphor for a faith-filled life also, as an element that is vital for life but which loses its' efficiency and effectiveness if it is corrupted by other things and thus weakened.

What causes salt to lose its' saltiness? Mainly this happens when it has other things added to it that dilutes it; this was a common

problem in Jesus' time due to the number of uses that salt was put to and to the cost of it – to corrupt it with other cheaper and useless elements meant that more profit could be made out of it.

It is a similar problem with the saltiness of our faith; other things can weaken it and reduce its' effectiveness. Things such as the urge to accumulate things and 'get ahead' at the expense of others; as the cost of following Jesus becomes clear and we give in to the temptation to supplement our salt and thus dilute it; as the injustices that we allow to continue for fear of upsetting others or of reducing our status; as we develop practices and habits that reduce the time we have to spend with God and with others in God's service – and so on. Such things can easily creep in and reduce our saltiness without us even realising at first what is happening.

Maintaining a regular pattern of prayer and scripture reading and worship needs to be the bedrock of our faith, along with the other opportunities we have to learn from God's Word. And in order to make that come alive – to give saltiness to our lives – we live that

out in the words we speak to other (through the Holy Spirit as Paul reminds us), and in the practical loving care and defence of others and their needs. Let us not take this teaching with a pinch of salt, but with a good dose of the essential elements for a lively faith and an acknowledgement of the vital place that salt has in our spiritual lives to help us maintain our health.