

Homily of the 5th Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year A

Jesus says in today's Gospel, "you are the salt of the earth ... You are the light of the world." We can understand what Jesus means by looking closely at the importance of salt and importance of light.

During the Nigeria-Biafra Civil War, 1967 to 1970, one of the food items that was scarce on the Biafran side was salt. Due to lack of salt many people were sick and many died, especially children. In human body, salt helps the functioning of cells, nerves and muscles, and good for bones. Lack of it adversely affects the bones, and the malfunctioning of the cells, nerves and muscles. Salt is very essential to our health.

Let us examine other ways salt is important to us: Many kinds of food are bland and tasteless without salt. Salt gives flavor and taste to such foods. Before the invention of fridges and freezers, salt was an important agent of preserving meat and other kinds of food. It is widely believed that salt was the oldest method of preserving food. Salt is very medicinal and has played a great role in medicine since the beginning of humankind. Salt plays a key role in African traditional medicine. Salt is used for cleaning, washing, purifying, and disinfecting. Seeing the importance of salt to humanity, we can easily understand why Jesus says, "You are the salt of the earth."

The Bible gives a good example of the purifying power of salt: "*Once the inhabitants of the city complained to Elisha, 'The site of the city is fine indeed, as my lord can see, but the water is bad and the land unfruitful.' 'Bring me a new bowl,' Elisha said, 'and put salt in it.' When they had brought it to him, he went out to the spring and threw salt into it, saying, 'Thus says the Lord, 'I have purified this water. Never again shall death or miscarriage spring from it.' And the water has stayed pure even to this day, just as Elisha prophesied'*"(2King 2:19-22).

At Baptism, a candle is lit and given to our parents if we were baptized as babies, or given to us if we were baptized as adults. It symbolizes the light of Christ in us that must not go out. In John 8:12, Jesus says, "I am the light of the world" (the Gospel acclamation of today). But in today's Gospel Jesus is saying, not just me, you my followers are also the light of the world. Jesus is saying that there are a lot Christians can do to dispel darkness in our environment. Also, as salt of the earth, there are a lot Christians can do to restore life, to heal many wounds, to preserve faith and to bring sanity to our world.

The first reading enumerates some areas we can be salt of the earth and light of the world: Feed the hungry, shelter the oppressed and homeless, cloth the naked, do not turn your back on the afflicted, do not get involved in oppressing others, or in false accusation and malicious speech. We have lost our saltiness and our flame when we become insensitive to the suffering and the afflicted, when we see them as nuisance to get rid of, rather than fellow human beings to be treated with love, care and dignity. We have lost our saltiness and our flame when we have become numb to others' affliction and suffering. We hear about tragedies on the news or watch it on the TV, we say, "Too bad," and we quickly change the channel, probably to some comedy or sports. It is possible to lose ones saltiness and flame without knowing it.

Right before us are those in need of our help; and those in need of our love, care and support. They may be the elderly, the lonely, the sick, the troubled, the grieving, the deprived, the incapacitated, the heartbroken and so on. These people who are afflicted in one way or another are in our homes, in our communities, in our parish, in our work places, in our neighborhood, and in our country. Life has no taste for some of these people. Some of them see only darkness and hopelessness around them all the time. We are mandated today to go and be salt and light to them in one way or another. God has given us the power to keep each other out of darkness, tastelessness and hopelessness.

Last Sunday we were promised that God rewards good people. The promises are repeated today in the first reading for those who are salt and light to others: "Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your wounds shall quickly be healed; your vindication shall go before you, and the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer, you shall cry for help, and he will say: Here I am...." St Paul tell us in 1 Corinthians 1:9 that God is faithful and does not fail his promises. Psalm 34:8, "Taste and see that the Lord is good."

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