

5th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

GOSPEL

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Jesus said to his disciples: 'You are the salt of the earth. But if salt becomes tasteless, what can make it salty again? It is good for nothing, and can only be thrown out to be trampled underfoot by men.'

'You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill-top cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp to put it under a tub; they put it on the lamp-stand where it shines for everyone in the house. In the same way your light must shine in the sight of men, so that, seeing your good works, they may give the praise to your Father in heaven.'

(Matthew 5:13-16)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- In the ancient world, salt was absolutely essential. It was used not simply to season food or to add to its taste, but also as a preservative, enabling food to be stored and kept.
- At the time of Jesus, the main source of oil for lamps was the olive. A saucer-shaped lamp held the oil, and a wick, made of flax or a similar material, burned from a small opening on the rim. Such lamps were often placed in a niche in the walls of rooms.
- Lamp oil was a precious commodity. Once lit, a lamp was often placed high to give maximum illumination.
- Ancient cities were often built on hilltops so that they were easily defended against invaders and were visible for many miles around.

EXPLORING THE WORD

To understand this text, it is important to place it alongside the Beatitudes that immediately precede it (you could read these together first). In that text, the virtues to be cultivated by followers of Jesus are outlined, but the danger with taking the Beatitudes on their own is that faith can become contented peacefulness and somewhat inward-looking. To avoid this risk, Matthew follows the Beatitudes with this text, which teaches disciples about the task of Christians in the world. They have been given the gifts; they are the salt of the earth. But if they just see their blessedness and rest there, they risk becoming 'tasteless' and good only to be 'trampled underfoot'. Instead, the disciples are urged to place their light high on a hill and let it shine for all to see. They are witnesses to God's living presence, not just for the nation of Israel but for all the world. In seeing the way that Christians live and act—their 'good works'—others will be drawn to God through their active witness to faith. Others will come to give praise to God in heaven. This is an amazing responsibility, and Jesus acknowledges that some salt may lose its taste and some lights be hidden. The challenge for Christians, new and old, is not to take the gift of faith for granted and let it become tasteless; not to keep the light confined to private moments but to allow others to see the difference faith makes so that they can know the presence and power of God.

- How is this a challenge to you?
- How can you let your faith shine forth?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- What aspects of your journey so far have been a 'light' to you?
- For whom are you a light?
- In what circumstances does your light shine best?
- Reflect on what it is in your life that gives you zest and flavour, and that preserves you. What guides your behaviour and gives you strength to keep going? What is 'salt' to you? Share your reflections.
- Identify one talent that you have and use it well and often this week. Let your light shine.
- Use a candle this week each time you pray. Use an adaptation of the gospel acclamation:

*I am the light of the world, says the Lord;
the one who follows me
will have the light of life.
Alleluia!*

SHARING THE TRADITION

A closer look at the Scripture of the day, to see how it makes more explicit God's word to us through the teachings of Jesus Christ

In the early 1960s, a momentous event occurred in the history of the Church. The Second Vatican Council was convened by Pope John XXIII. His desire was to throw open the windows of the Church and let fresh air in so that it related more appropriately to the modern world and modern humans.

- You could give some background to Vatican II and the impact it has had.

One of the key documents from that council was the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, known in Latin as *Lumen Gentium* ('Light of All Peoples'). Its aim was to be a statement of the Church's own understanding of itself and the role it is destined to take in the world.

- You could take some key statements from this document as the basis of your discussion. See especially Chapter II on the Church as 'the people of God'.
- In what ways do you see evidence of the Church as 'salt of the earth' or 'light of the world' today?
- What more could be done? How are you called to participate in this?

SYMBOLS AND IMAGES

The people of Israel often described the Law of God as 'salt' because it gave zest and flavour to life and it preserved them as the people of God. Similarly, the Law was often compared to a light that showed them the path to God: 'Your word is a light to my feet and a lamp to my path' (Psalm 119:105). Jerusalem, the city on the hill, was a focal point and reminder of God's presence. Jesus gives a new focus to all these images when he applies them to those who hear his word and put it into practice. All Christians are called to be 'salt' and 'light', a 'city on the hill' giving witness to God's presence.

LIVING THE WORD

Practical ideas for group leaders to employ in connecting Scripture and daily life, with suggestions for music and environment

- How does your own parish community reflect the understanding of Church presented in *Lumen Gentium*? Are there ways this can be improved?
- Use an oil lamp and a small dish of salt as a focus for prayer. Pray for the Church and its leaders. Pray for each other as you journey to full membership of the Church. A suitable song could be 'Church of God' (GA 480). Conclude with the prayer of blessing in the *RCIA* at §97A.

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