



5th Sunday in Ordinary Time



Date: Sunday, February 5, 2017 | **Season:** Ordinary Time before Easter | **Year:** A

First Reading: Isaiah 58:7–10

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 12:4–9 | **Response:** Psalm 12:4a

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 2:1–5

Gospel Acclamation: John 8:12

Gospel Reading: Matthew 5:13–16

Preached at: the Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Braamfontein in the Archdiocese of Johannesburg, South Africa.

Taken together today's readings talk to us about three things: true Piety, true Preaching and true Presence.

True piety, the prophet Isaiah declares in today's First Reading, does not consist in ritual acts of fasting, but in responding to the practical demands of justice: feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, clothing the naked. Isaiah is saying that worshiping God involves more than observing an outward ritual; there must be an inward conversion of heart. Catholic spirituality has always stressed that love of neighbour and works of mercy are clear proof of a person's love of God and are the true touchstone of any true religion.

True preaching St Paul says in today's Second Reading, is not about the eloquence or rhetorical genius of the messenger, but consists rather in preaching the content of the true message, that is Jesus Christ and him crucified. Paul had tried using great rhetoric to convince people in Athens – but that did not seem to work for him. He had been forced to leave Philippi, Thessalonica, and Beroea because of persecution and eventually ended up alone in Corinth, without any of the support of his companions. In today's reading Paul is doing something new – relying on God rather than on himself. So instead of coming with great self-confidence of a powerful speaker Paul explains that he was overwhelmed by his own human weakness in the face of this divine message confided to him. He likens this to the “fear and trembling” with which he tells us we should work out our own salvation. We are unworthy, but we remain hopeful and grateful. His reliance not on rhetoric, but on the power of the cross, which is God's own word to

the Corinthians and to us today, points to the message rather than the messenger. Thus he proclaimed what would at first seem to be too terrible for either Jew and Greek to comprehend: a crucified Messiah has come. They were both expecting someone glorious and successful – but like last week when we heard the Beatitudes, God’s measure of success is not our own. Here the Messiah came to suffer and die – but also to rise again. An unpalatable and unexpected message to be sure, but that message was the truth and Paul could not hide it – indeed he needed to proclaim it in its entirety so that others might truly see. This was the light that Paul and Jesus said could not be hidden. It was the message that had to be proclaimed through building churches on hilltops and living a public Christian life – not in secret or in private, but in the broad light of day in the public square for all to see.

True Presence is that presence that we hear of in today’s Gospel. In today’s Gospel Jesus uses three metaphors, simple images to explain this sense of presence and its purpose, and all three have something in common: Salt does not exist for itself, but to season things; light does not exist for itself, but to brighten its surroundings; and the city on a hill is constructed to be a visible orientation point for others. Each metaphor has as its end, a service or benefit to other people. But these images do not just propel people to go out to others, but Jesus is retrieving images that would have been familiar to Israel within their history.

Let’s look at the first one, salt. Salt carries several meanings in today’s Gospel. Salt prevents food from going bad, it was a preservative, but it also brought out the true flavor of things. It was very distinctive – you could never mistake the taste of salt. In the old covenants God had called Israel to be the salt of the earth; Israel was God’s chosen people – distinct, set apart from others. But at Jesus’ time Israel was no longer distinct. She was behaving like everyone else, with power politics, factional squabbles, and militant revolutions. How could God keep the world from going bad if Israel, God’s chosen ‘salt’, had lost its distinctive taste? Jesus is calling all of us to be salt of the earth.

This requires us to stay true to our identity as disciples of Jesus. But we cannot remain pure and set ourselves apart from other people. Indeed, salt only makes sense if it is mixed up and is enjoyed with other food. If we ate only salt, we would die. This is a warning from Jesus to those who would prefer to remain aloof, unsullied and uninvolved with the world around them. We need to be inserted into the world, always bearing witness to our faith.

Pope Francis said once that he prefers “a church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets”, and he asked priests to “get their shoes muddy” as we get involved in the lives of the people. The Gospel requires that we always go out of ourselves, to encounter Jesus in the other person, and most often in the other who is poor, weak and vulnerable.

Our second image is that of light. In the first reading light breaks forth like the dawn when someone shares bread with a hungry person, clothes the naked, takes the homeless into their house. In the second reading the Apostle Paul’s light and seasoning “power is announced, when he says that he ‘knows nothing’ and wants to proclaim nothing ‘except the Crucified One’”. That is his spiritual gift to us. We each have our own talents and gifts and God intends us to use them, to let them shine so that others might see. The light that shines from us is not simply for our own benefit or to win the gratitude of others, but for all in the house so others may see our good deeds and glorify God.

Our third image is that of the city on the hill which is meant to be a beacon to those around. A way of orientating oneself as one journeys towards, or away from it. It is a fixed point of reference. In this age of “relative truth” and “alternative facts”, the good news of Jesus Christ is that invariant and unchanging truth. A truth by which we can align our lives and orient ourselves in relation to it.

Jesus warns us, however, that it is possible to go the wrong way, when he talks of a disciple losing their ‘saltiness’ or becoming dim. When we cease to proclaim Jesus, to make his presence felt in the world and to live the Beatitudes in our daily life, then we are like tasteless salt and a darkened lamp... good for nothing except to be trampled underfoot. We must season those around us with our distinctive identity as Christ-followers through our good works and just actions. We must radiate our light to others so that they may see. We must point towards the truth so that others might know the way.

Why is this important? We hear in the first reading of the importance of good works. Our faith is dead without them. But there is a risk here. We must not do these works so that we are praised. Again we must take our example from Jesus, who never pointed to himself, but always directed people towards the Father.

Everyone who really prays (like the tax collector, not like the Pharisee), learns profoundly that he or she must shine forth as a whole, because God is the self-giving triune love within them. It is within this love that each person exists solely for the other and knows nothing of “being-for-oneself”.

We are blessed at Holy Trinity because we have parishioners who have understood the meaning of true piety, true preaching and true presence. Tomorrow evening we will be commemorating a statue of the Homeless Jesus – a testament to Jesus’ presence among the homeless, but also to His presence that is alive and well within our parish. Our piety is not of the false kind that Isaiah warned against, but consists in the practical and tangible works of mercy evidenced in the presence of the many volunteers who support our soup kitchens, teach catechism for our youth and homeless, and in the many sodalities who help the poor, such as the Society of St Vincent De Paul, the Community of St Egidio and ACTS.

Today I’d like to leave you with some thoughts to ponder because there is always a danger that we think we can live our Christian lives only for ourselves without getting mixed up in the world like salt. Let us ask ourselves,

“How am I being salt for my world?”

“With what, and with whom, is God mixing me up with?”

“How am I helping to preserve life in our world?”

Amen.

Source: <https://sj.mcharlesworth.fr/homilies/2017-02feb-05-ya-ot-05/>

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