

FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY YEAR A

6th February 2011

1. It is interesting that of the two images Jesus used to describe the role of his followers in the world, the collect focuses on light and salt is ignored. I think most people could explain the metaphor of light but would struggle with salt, yet salt, like water is one of the essentials for life. Salt flavours, heals, and preserves. The simile, "You are salt" is full of rich meaning which is just as valid today as it was when Jesus taught.

2. Salt is essential for life. Chloride and sodium ions, the two major components of salt, are necessary for the survival of all living creatures including humans. Sodium is one of the primary electrolytes in the body. All four cationic electrolytes (sodium, potassium, magnesium, and calcium) are available in unrefined salt, as are other vital minerals needed for optimal bodily function.
Too much or too little salt in the diet can lead to problems (Wikipedia). It exists unseen and without fanfare in our bloodstreams and in the sap of plants, helping vital functions, maintaining good health. The salty sea provides an environment for a huge number of creatures. Salt enhances flavour. Although we are warned about excessive use, we know that some of the food we eat just needs a little salt to bring out the flavour, the true qualities of say an egg or a tomato or a mornay. Salt heals. Who has not washed a wound in salty water, or bathed in the sea to soothe a rash and heal a sore? And salt preserves. It stops things from going bad. A quick look in the pantry and frig will find olives, fish, meat and vegetables preserved in brine. The refrigerator has still not replaced salt as a preservative!

3. So we are to be salt and light in the world
 - Bringing out the best qualities in others, encouraging them in their growth to fullness of life, a life lived with the flavours and colours of goodness, mercy, joy and justice.

- Helping to preserve all that is good and true in the cause of justice and peace, helping our world to be a place of compassion, equity and freedom
- Shining a light on things of darkness and oppression and untruth Such action says the Lord in Isaiah 58.1-9a is true worship and the Lord will say, 'here am I' . We can do these things only with the mind of Christ and in the power of his Spirit.(1 Cor.2.1-16) . May our light not grow dim or our saltiness diluted!

SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY YEAR A

13th February 2011

1. What does the Lord your God require of you? This is a perennial question, obviously as important to the early Israelites as it is to us? And the answer is just as wise: to fear God, walk in his ways, serve God wholeheartedly and keep his commandments. Each of these needs to be 'unpacked' for each generation, but at their heart, it does not matter which time or place or cultural setting, these will be the essence of the law. (Deut. 10.12-22)
2. "It is perhaps better to use 'awe' rather than 'fear'. God's holiness, his otherness, his transcendence throws our sinfulness into relief. His purity fills us with a sense of our unworthiness and prompts us to stand in awe and adoration of the transcendent holy Lord who, nevertheless, loves us totally so much that, through Jesus, he gave of himself for our salvation (Richardson, A Theological Word Book of the Bible). Such awe does not paralyse us in fear but instead it gives us courage for we are then receptive to the Spirit to embolden us to serve God as he calls us, to put our selfish desires behind us, and to look out on the world with love.
3. In Jesus' day, all Jews knew the Law, but it was an intellectual knowledge which required application with love and compassion.
Jesus' sermon unpacks much of the Law to give a better emphasis to the great commandments which underpinned the whole Law. It's as if, essential statements like today's from Deuteronomy had been lost! Matt. 5.21-37 interprets three of the 10 Commandments for his congregation "on the mount", the place of revelation reminiscent of God's revelation to Moses. Thou shalt not murder, commit adultery or take the Lord's name in vain.
4. We need to hear again these interpretations. We can 'murder' in so many different ways. Our anger, our jealousy, our belittling of another, our gossip, our abuse, are all ways of

diminishing life. In marriage, there are so many ways to be unfaithful - sexually, in cheating with money, in failure to nurture and cherish. In public dealings there are so many ways to be unfaithful to others in business dealings, in cheating customers, in beating down a fair price, in not acknowledging the worth due to a producer, yet all the while saying we are acting in good faith.

SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY YEAR A

20th February 2011

1. "Hidden God, whose wisdom compels our love and unsettles all our values" -the Prayer of the Day is itself unsettling. Particularly so, as is the Gospel, which challenges a complacent Church and complacent Christians who want the Church to be for them a place of comfort and stability, a haven in a world of turmoil and trouble. Don't rock the boat, don't cause trouble, are often themes in congregations and the wider Church, in fact there are 'no go areas', areas of our life which we do not like to mention for fear of unsettling values of some in the congregation or the church as a whole. Members of the church sometimes collude not to have a search for truth, not to reveal unwelcome facts, not to let us be involved in vigorous thinking, vigorous service, not to call a spade a spade.

2. The gospel can be 'counter-cultural'. Jesus knew this and today's excerpt from his sermon challenges human behaviour today just as it did 2000 years ago.
 - His words on retaliation certainly challenge. How often do we want 'to get back on someone who has offended us'. Payback doesn't just happen in organized crime. It happens in our families, our communities, our workplaces. And we take great delight in seeing tit-for-tat. 'Serves them right' is a common expression and wholeheartedly endorsed as we rejoice in the suffering of others.
 - And what about the treatment of those suing us? Is Jesus' exaggerating to make his point? Certainly we have taken into our language 'going the extra mile'. Generosity is at the heart of the gospel and it challenges us in our meanness, our lack of care for others, our selfishness, our hanging on to money and possessions.
 - The instructions concerning love are even more counter-cultural. It is easy to love our own, and to love those who love us. How hard it is to love the unlovely, the undeserving, those who have caused their own problems, the idle, the dirty, the one's who have no drive to look

after themselves. Yet these are the very people God loves and he challenges us to love them with the perfect love that is God's. Jesus' words are meant to 'rock the boat' of our complacency.

EIGHTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

27th February 2011

1. Today we pray for freedom from the need to justify ourselves by our own actions, and to abandon ourselves to faith in God alone. The Prayer of the Day and the gospel (Matthew 6.22-34) disturb our very beings, challenge our rational selves and the culture of our society.
2. If your eye is healthy your whole body will be full of light! How often do we see things through the wrong eyes! "Look at it this way", we say. We understand this metaphor of the eye. Jesus pleads with us to have healthy eyes. Eyes which see God as our heavenly Father who loves us unconditionally. He asks us to consider the birds, the flowers, the life of the world which he created and sustains. As his creatures we are loved because we are and we are God's children; he will provide for us. Nothing we can do, nothing we can worry about, will earn this care. He loves us for who we are, his children, not because of anything we do or think. He begs us to have the same trusting approach as the animals and plants of the earth, stopping our anxiety about doing things to deserve his love. Sometimes we hear things like, "If only I had given more time to God my life might not have been so difficult" -not so, God was suffering with you in the difficulty. His care has never left you.
3. Rationally, our minds find it hard to accept that 'all these things will be given to you as well' if you seek first the kingdom of God. But there are some saints of the Church whose lives have been lived in such trust St Francis who gave up a life of wealth to live simply, Mother Theresa of Calcutta in our own day, are just two. There are others less well-known, who in their daily lives live simply, live faithfully, and have no anxiety about their future, for they know that their heavenly Father loves them and cares for them. The hymn "Dear Lord and Father of mankind" expresses these ideas well.

4. God's words through the prophet Isaiah addressed to Zion sum it up for us too in words worth knowing by heart: "Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you."