

Sermon - Epiphany 5A

The Text: Matthew 5:13-20

“Be What You Are”

Some years ago the story was told of a 30-year-old man who spent most of his life as an imposter: at the age of 16 he posed as an airline pilot; at 19 he posed as a paediatrician. Later, he was an assistant district attorney. He was caught in the end. But by that time he had passed cheques amounting to 2.5 million dollars. He was not what he appeared to be.

Sometimes people tell us that they want nothing to do with the church. The reason? Because, so they say, there are too many hypocrites there. The trouble is that Christians don't always know who they are, and they don't act accordingly. Christians need to be genuine. They dare not be a phony or a hypocrite. The world is quite right in judging the truth of Jesus by the sort of people faith in Jesus is able to produce.

So the question for us, as Christians, is this: what are we? The answer to that question comes from Jesus. In the first two verses of today's Gospel he says that we are salt and light! Listen carefully! Jesus does not say you ought to be salt, or that should be light, but rather "You are salt...You are light." What a tremendous saying! After all, what Jesus is saying is this: "You disciples standing here before me—you are the salt of the earth and the light of the world."

One wonders if anyone in that bunch of people, squatting in the dust of that Galilean hillside, could take it all in. And what about us? The church was in its numerical heyday fifty years ago when Christians felt as if they were the majority. Numerical significance and cultural superiority was the self-understanding of most churches in the Western world at that time. We were the majority faith. This was our country, as we saw it, our world. Today, can you imagine that there ever was such a time, when they closed the petrol stations on Sunday mornings and refused to play football matches on Sundays? Were you endangered in the stampede leaving your neighbourhood this morning on your way to church? I doubt it. Here, when we go to church on Sundays even in a rural or middle-class neighbourhood, we are a minority with just a bit of occasional hostility and derision.

It's been said that it is a dubious sign if the world lives too peaceably with the church. We're all familiar with the saying about rubbing salt into a wound. Salt always bites and stings at those points where we men and women have wounds, where our sore-points are. So where there is salt in a church and it's preaching there is bound to be a negative reaction against it. But where there is no bitter reaction to the message what then? Perhaps what is lacking is a biting salty truth that will sting in some people's pious wounds. To be salt and light, Christians must be different from the world.

From the point of view of purely quantity, the proportion of practicing Christians to the whole mass of people in the world is comparable to the few grains for salt in a big pot of food. And when we Christians get discouraged as we think of how we few stand alone in our family, the place where we work, or among our friends and acquaintances; when we are afraid and confused, then we do well to take comfort from this saying of Jesus. He did not say: "You are the great power-bloc of the world". No, he said: "You are the pinch of salt in the world!" And that, by its very nature, is a very small quantity.

But actually, how often can the power of this one pinch of salt turn out to be mightily effective? When one person does not join in the gossip around the dinner table, then that pinch of salt seasons the negative group conversation. When one teenager refuses to go along with the group's plan for the night, then that can be a change of direction. When one Christian practices forgiveness in a company that is poisoned by hatred and the desire for revenge, then all of a sudden there can be a healing factor in the situation. When one Christian is willing to stand up for his or her faith where this is hard to do, then suddenly the whole atmosphere of a meeting can be "salted" as ears that were closed before may now be opened. When one person in any group paralysed by fear communicates something of the peace of God to others simply by being who they are and where they are, then the salt is doing its work in the midst of corrupting strife and disorder; then the light is shining in the darkness of fear and distrust.

There is still this other important attribute of both salt and light. Both become useful only when they give of themselves, when they are mixed with something else and sacrificed, as it were. Light goes into darkness and salt loses itself in the food. Each individual Christian is given a great promise: he or she is a grain of salt. But this one Christian also has the responsibility to share this promise. And, of course, if we are to fulfil this responsibility, then we must get out of the "salt-shaker" as it were. Salt works, salt remains salt only as it gives of itself. Or a Christian puts his light under a bowl simply because he is afraid that the winds that blow in the evil world, among his unbelieving friends in the factory or office or school will blow out the light of his faith. But when that light is kept under a bowl its light helps nobody, and what is more, it exhausts the oxygen and nothing is left but a nasty, shapeless wick.

You don't need to be super-confident to ask your neighbour to come with you to worship. You can do it faithfully in weakness, and in fear and trembling. You don't need to be brimming with slick ideas of how to get through to seventh graders to teach Sunday School. You don't need to be comfortably sure of what to say in order to visit a fellow member in the hospital. You don't have to be financially secure, guaranteed of a surplus for life, to be a steward who tithes. You don't need to feel sure of your faith to begin to pray regularly for others. You can stumble over the words, praying in weakness.

And if you do---when you do---you will find not that you miraculously have done everything perfectly, amazing people with your skills. But you will find that the Lord keeps his promise, and that somehow the words you stumbled over---the awkward condolence, the wavering word of love, the blurted invitation---found a home in another human heart.

A Christian dentist moved into a new house. He soon found neighbourhood teenagers littering his yard and riding their bicycles over his lawn. None of this encouraged him to love his new neighbours as himself. One night the leader of the teenage group had a bad toothache. The boy's mother sent the boy to the dentist for a check-up. The dentist found the tooth in need of expensive repair and offered to take care of it. The boy refused. He said his family couldn't pay the bill for a job like that. In the end the dentist persuaded the lad to let him do the repairs. The dentist did not send the boy a bill. Soon he forgot the incident. That summer the dentist left town for an extended holiday. When he returned, he found that his lawn had been well looked after during all that time by the teenager whose tooth he'd fixed. The dentist tried to pay the boy. But he refused. Shyly he said: "A tooth for a tooth".

With day-by-day efforts like that, we make our light shine. We bring rich flavour to a tasteless society, and so become the salt of the earth. God gave his only-begotten Son for this world. Therefore we are called upon to be salt and light for this same world. And certainly the world is worth saving by our sacrifice because this one man Jesus Christ first sacrificed himself for all of us. We are to be the little grains of salt for the little bit of earth that God has entrusted to us. We are to be the glimmer of light for that little part of the world in which we live and move and have our being. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all human understanding, which will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.