

# the Sunday Readings



*Sets the light on a stand and it gives light to all in the house.  
( Matthew 5 : 15 )*

## 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday Ordinary Time (a)

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## *being 'salt' and 'light' in the world*<sup>1</sup>

### introduction

Today's gospel passage begins a series of three Sundays, where the gospel readings are drawn from Matthew's account of Jesus' *Sermon on the Mount*.<sup>2</sup> For disciples who hunger and thirst for holiness, there's nothing more enlightening than turning to Jesus' own words and seeing his way of teaching the truth. Pope Francis, reflecting on *the Beatitudes*, comments that they are like, 'a Christian's identity card'.<sup>3</sup> If we were to ask ourselves, 'what must I do to be a good Christian?' – we have to do, each in our own way, what Jesus tells us to do in *the Sermon on the Mount*.<sup>4</sup>

### first reading: Isaiah 58 : 7 – 10<sup>5</sup>

[ true worship ]

*Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,  
and bring the homeless poor into your house;  
when you see the naked, to cover them  
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?(7)  
Then your light shall break forth like the dawn  
and your healing shall spring up quickly;  
your vindicator shall go before you,  
the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.(8)  
Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;  
you shall cry for help, and he will say, "Here I am".  
If you remove the yoke from among yoke  
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,(9)  
if you offer your food to the hungry  
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,  
then your light shall rise in the darkness  
and your gloom be like the noonday.(10)*

According to the prophet the ending of exile offers those returning to Jerusalem, the opportunity to receive from the LORD's hand, a new way of living. The old world of royal house and temple had gone. However, the experience of exile had tempted the former excluded ones to produce a new generation of outcasts. The new religious leaders had drawn up narrow rules that excluded all those who were not holy and upright. The prophet Isaiah exposes as idolatry what

1 Cover Image: Still Life with a Burning Candle (Detail) Pieter Claesz (1627).

2 Mt.5:1 – 7:29

3 Gaudete et Exultate: On the Call to Holiness in Today's World: no.63 Pope Francis (2018)

4 In the introduction to his pastoral reflection of the individual Beatitudes in the Gospel of Matthew, Pope Francis states: 'Let us listen once more to Jesus, with all the love and respect that the Master deserves. Let us allow his words to unsettle us, to challenge us and to demand a real change in the way we live. Otherwise, holiness will remain no more than an empty word' – Gaudete et Exultate no.66

5 The biblical excerpts are drawn from the New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), published by Oxford University Press (1994).

the priestly circle called, 'justice'. The community was acting 'as if' it was just, but in fact, it was deeply self-indulgent (vv.2-6).

Filled with a liberated hope at the ending of exile, the prophet acts passionately to express the shape of the new community, which will surely replace this unjust, exclusive order that has arisen in their post-exile home. Isaiah offers an alternative, in the face the politics of exclusion. He reminds us that even when desperate economic and legal conditions apply, the LORD's justice can't be neglected. The dominant ideology had tried to deny and cover over the hurts and pain of the new social conditions. The prophet on the other hand offers the way to new life in community. It is in the subversive act of fasting (v.10). Rather than denials and cover-ups, fasting realises the dream that a different ordering is possible in society. Fasting is an act of concrete hope.

Isaiah assumes that an alternative community will come into being which will over-turn the rules and values of the reigning ideology. Such a community will be able to practise a form of faith that differs from an ideology which ignores and denies the existence of hungry, hurting ones. By including the hurting ones, those who are compassionate exhibit GOD's 'justice'. Recognising the hurt and entering into it, through their actions of solidarity, they make the new society possible.

**response: Psalm 112 : 4 – 9**

[ the blessings of the righteous ]

*They rise in the darkness as a light for the upright;  
they are gracious, merciful and righteous (4)  
It is well with those who deal generously and lend,  
who conduct their affairs with justice.(5)  
For the righteous will never be moved;  
they will be remembered forever.(6)  
They are not afraid of evil tidings;  
their hearts are firm, secure in the LORD.(7)  
Their hearts are steady, they will not be afraid;  
in the end they will look in triumph on their foes.(8)  
They have distributed freely, they have given to the poor;  
their righteousness endures forever;  
their horn is exalted in honour.(9)*

The psalmist asserts that giving of one's life resources away to others in the community is the way to real joy.(v.4) The speech echoes Jesus' teaching; "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for uprightness, they shall have their fill".<sup>6</sup> Satisfaction in the Scriptures, doesn't derive from greed, self-serving, or self-sufficiency. Fulfillment comes from trusting the generosity of the LORD, who always supplies a person's needs. The beneficiary of such fulfillment can in turn

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Mt.5:6 – the Psalmist details the blessings received by those who remain close to GOD by obedience to the commandments. Among their blessings are children(v.2), wealth that enables them to be magnanimous (vv.3,5,9) and virtue by which they encourage others (v.4).

be generous. The truly happy person knows the abundance of the LORD, the Creator GOD. Believing in the LORD's generosity permits different social practises. The LORD GOD is praised because the world is reliable.

The new world will be morally coherent, because the Creator remembers the covenant and commands covenant-obedience (v.1). In the face of difficulties, the speaker affirms that trustful living is possible and necessary for a decent society. The psalmist explores the idea that people who, *'fear the LORD'* – that is, those who keep *Torah (the Law of Moses)* – will be happy. The well-being of happy people, runs the full range of human desire. It includes the very material yearning for wealth (v.3) and a steadiness that isn't shattered by adversity (vv.7-8). Such persons are described as; *'upright'* (v.9).

The speaker describes an upright person in an upright society, reigned over by an upright GOD. Life is good. In *verses 6 & 9 the upright one* is affirmed. This affirmation means that such persons act with integrity to make goodness triumph in the world. The *uprightness* or *power to be life-giving* of the happy person, is possible because of the very character of the LORD's power is life-giving. The LORD is known to be gracious, merciful and life-giving; the basis for human life-giving.

**second reading: 1 Corinthians 2 : 1 – 5**

[ proclaiming Christ crucified ]

*When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of GOD to you in lofty words or wisdom.(1) For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.(2) And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling.(3) My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power,(4) so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of GOD.(5)*

*'The mystery of GOD'* is GOD's plan for the salvation of the people (v.1).<sup>7</sup> Concerned with divisions within the Corinthian community, the apostle had earlier affirmed that his calling is, *"to proclaim the Gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the Cross of Christ might not be emptied of it's power"*.<sup>8</sup> The apostle affirms that the faith of the Corinthian community, has it's basis in GOD's power for life-giving in his (the apostle's) message and not by any cleverness on his part, as the messenger (vv.4-5). In this way Paul emphasises his fidelity to the plain, yet forceful presentation of Jesus' *good news*. He refuses to use any rhetoric or logic.<sup>9</sup> He simply proclaims the person and teachings of Jesus as, *the crucified Christ* in *'fear'* and *'trembling'* (v.3).<sup>10</sup> The existence of the Corinthian community itself and the fact that some have responded well to his earlier message to them, is

7 *'The mystery of GOD'* -is GOD's secret. From 1 Co. 1:18-25; 2:2, 8-10, the secret clearly involves Jesus and the Cross.

8 1 Co.1:17b

9 The art of rhetoric or persuasion had been developed to a high degree in cultures under Greek influence. Maybe Paul had in mind the group who claimed earlier to belong to Apollos and who may have ignored the *'powerlessness'* and *'folly'* by worldly standards, of the crucified Jesus.

evidence for Paul of divine power (v.4).<sup>11</sup> The apostle mentions no miracles. The success of his apprenticing work in Corinth is based on the power of GOD alone. It wasn't inspired by the force of the apostle's logic or his attractiveness as a popular speaker. He is attacking the basis of the divisions within the Christian community at Corinth.

**gospel reading: Matthew 5:13-16**

[ salt and light ]

*Jesus said to his disciples, "You are the Salt of the Earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot".(13) "You are the Light of the World. A city built on a hill cannot be hid.(14) No one after lighting a lamp, puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house.(15) In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven".(16)*

For Matthew disciples need to undergo a profound change of attitude if they are to correctly discern GOD's living Torah and dedicate themselves to the obedience that Jesus' performance standards require. Jesus had arranged for the apprenticeship of his disciples, so they would emerge with his own consciousness and performance skills. The evangelist now affirms that Jesus defined the personal identity of his followers as: 'salt' and 'light' to the world (vv.13-16). As *salt*, they will be indispensable agents to flavour and preserve humanity. If disciples loses this quality of flavouring and preserving, their society becomes less truly human and they become useless as agents of GOD's victory over the power of death.<sup>12</sup> As *'light'* the disciples are brought face-to-face with Isaiah's hope – of shining the light of the Torah on the faces of the nations.<sup>13</sup>

People have characterised Jesus' ministry as the conversion of sinners, where *'conversion'* is understood as the profound experience of forgiveness of the sort that acknowledged sinners feel when they wholeheartedly reject the tenacious source of sin within their hearts. The Jesus of Matthew's gospel, seems indifferent to the conversion of public sinners to standards of public morality. Matthew shows a Jesus, more intent upon transforming the very norms of public morality.<sup>14</sup> The conversion that Jesus calls for, is nothing less than a transformation of the

10 *'Fear and much trembling'* – fear based on a sense of GOD's transcendence permeates Paul's existence and preaching. Compare his advice to the Philippians to work out their salvation with *'fear and trembling'* (cf. *Ph.2:12*) because GOD is at work in them just as GOD's exalting power was paradoxically at work in the emptying, humiliation and obedience of Jesus to death on the Cross (cf. *Ph.2:6-11*).

11 The inefficacy of human wisdom for salvation is contrasted with the power of the Cross.

12 [v.13] *'salt losing its flavour'* has led to supposing the saying refers to the salt of the Dead Sea that, because of chemical impurities, could lose its taste.

13 *Is.42:6-8*

14 The gospel contains no censure or call to conversion to any public sinner. But Jesus frequently censures Pharisees, scribes and priests: the very people that public sinners consider as being *'close to GOD'*. Jesus' contends that these so-called *'religious leaders'* are blind guides: *"For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven"* (*Mt.23:13*).

status quo of religious self-understanding. It is conversion to a new possibility for living *the Torah of GOD (the Torah of his 'Father')*. Morality is involved. But the moral ethos is only a by-product of the re-orientation of a disciple's consciousness. Matthew offers a case study, which shows how Jesus trained his disciples to follow the '*Living Torah of GOD*' so as to be, '*salt*' and '*light*'.

An example of this is when Jesus cites the text which was well-known to his disciples, '*You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy . . .*';<sup>15</sup> '*But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you*'.<sup>16</sup> Citing a text and interpreting it, is standard procedure for teachers of Torah. Jesus opposes himself to those who define, *neighbour* narrowly so as to exclude '*those who persecute you*'. He urges that the GOD of the Universe, distributes blessings of sunshine and rain upon both friend and foe.<sup>17</sup> It follows that anyone who would be a daughter or son of this GOD, must live the same Torah. Jesus indicates that tax collectors and pagans, who know nothing of GOD's Torah, already practise a code of honourably looking out for their friends and benefactors.<sup>18</sup> But anyone content to limit their practise to this code, can't be, '*the Salt of the Earth*' or '*the Light of the World*'. They merely conform to existing standards. His disciples must exhibit the very highest standards, or as the New Jerusalem Bible paraphrases the next verse - "*You must therefore set no bounds to your love, just as your heavenly Father sets none to His!*"<sup>19</sup>

The progressive expansion of *the Jesus Movement* throughout the world during the two thousand years following Jesus' death, flows from the force of such encounters between would-be disciples and this teacher of *GOD's living Torah (the Law of Love)*. Jesus was able to successfully impart to his disciples the meaning of GOD's victory over the power of death. By the fruits of his apprenticing, that is, the existence of an unbroken chain of successful discipleships, we know him and these values today.

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15 *Lv.19:18*

16 *Mt.5:43-44*

17 *Ibid.v.45*

18 *Ibid.vv.46-48a.*

19 *Ibid.v.48b* – Luke has: "*Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful. Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you*" See *Lk.6:36-38*

**for sharing:**<sup>20</sup>

- *Promoting justice is key to what is best in the Scriptures. We have to assess our personal contribution to social justice in the light of the WORD of the prophet: **Comment on Isaiah 58 : 7 – 10***
- *The substance of Paul's message and his identity as believer in Christ, allowed Jesus' spirit/Spirit to speak through him. Consider our personal standards for judging the power of GOD and the cleverness of preachers: **Comment on 1 Corinthians 2 : 1 – 5***
- *Consider what is in need of conversion in our own lives if we are to be 'salt' and 'light' in our world: **Comment on Matthew 5 : 13 – 16***

**prayer:**<sup>21</sup>

*Heavenly Father,  
 You have called Your Church  
 to be the Salt of the Earth  
 and the Light of the World.  
 Give us vigorous faith  
 and a love that is genuine,  
 so that all may see our works  
 and give You the glory.  
 We make our prayer through  
 our LORD Jesus Christ, Your Son,  
 who lives and reigns with You  
 in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
 GOD now and always. Amen.*

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20 Lectio Divina: reading GOD's WORD in a moment of prayer and allowing it to enlighten and renew us: The practise of *lectio divina* requires a quiet space, a passage of scripture and the willingness to give time to the project. The passage used should be short. For the purpose of this leaflet, we suggest using the gospel reading of the up-coming Sunday. There are four steps in the traditional practise of *lectio divina*. The steps don't have to have the following order: *lectio (reading)* – read the passage of Scripture read slowly - more than once. If a particular word, phrase, or sentence seems significant (even if you don't know why) you may want to write it down. *meditatio (reflection)* – let the significant words fill your mind without straining to analyse them. We are in GOD's presence and so let the Holy Spirit lead your understanding of the words. *oratio (prayer)* – allow your heart to speak to GOD, in words inspired by the passage of Scripture, or by the thoughts that have come to you, while reflecting on it. *contemplatio (rest)* – let go of ideas and words and allow yourself to rest in the presence of GOD, in simple and wordless contemplation. This leaflet gives the context and some commentary on each of the readings and the psalm used in the Sunday's liturgy. Familiarity with the texts and the commentary beforehand, can better prepare our hearing and understanding the passages in our worship. Whatever our preparation for doing this exercise and whatever questions we may use to break open the passage, we must be conscious of Christ's promise: *'Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them'*

21 The prayer that concludes the Lectio Divina is ICEL's 1998 opening prayer from the Proper of the Day. These prayers draw upon the concrete and vivid images of Scripture and conclude with a clearly focused petition inspired by the readings.

**review:**<sup>22</sup>

What makes us *'salt'* and *'light'* is the way we relate to other people and things. Jesus reveals the way that GOD relates to all that GOD has made. Disciples must care for the poor and for the Earth, just as *the GOD of Exodus* cared for the poor. The *'good life'* is defined in relation to others. Its not a condition, or a property, or a state of being, but *a set of actions-in-relationship*. Generosity towards others and the environment, makes for joy in the life of faithful disciples. If we don't trust GOD's generosity, we can't practise generosity, and we fail to understand the generosity of The LORD.

We can take Psalm 112:4–9 as our guide in this matter. Its claim to be a guide to happiness asserts that giving resources away to others in the community is the way to genuine joy. The psalmist mirrors Jesus' teaching: *"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for uprightness, for they will be filled"* (Mt.5:6). Satisfaction and fulfilment, says this Scriptural tradition, do not derive from greed or self-sufficiency. Fulfilment comes from trusting in the generosity of GOD who always feeds us! Then we are obliged to be generous to others!

The righteous person is the one who knows the abundance of a Creator, who witholds nothing needful from the LORD GOD's own precious creation. Believing in GOD's generosity, permits a different social practise among Jesus' disciples.

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<sup>22</sup> The review – at the end of each reflection the review examines one of the themes of the readings, usually drawn from the gospel, and provides an opportunity to check our own performance, in the light of the WORD and Eucharist that we have previously heard and experienced.