

Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
Church of St. Thomas More, NYC February 9, 2020
5th Sunday of Year A – 2020 Is 58: 7-10, Mt 5:13-16

Last Sunday you may have watched the Super Bowl--perhaps to follow the game, maybe just to view the commercials. It is, of course, an important time for advertisers to showcase what will be the image or the slogan that will identify their brand in the coming months. In today's Gospel we have something a little similar--not that Jesus is a marketer trying to sell something, but Jesus does present two images to identify, to capture what his disciples are all about--"salt" and "light." He says quite explicitly to them, and to us, "You are the salt of the earth...You are the light of the world." Jesus chooses two basic substances from everyday life as metaphors to illustrate the distinctive quality or characteristic that is to identify those who will carry on His work in the world.

What is so special about salt and light, except their power to enhance something else--to improve the quality of that to which they are applied? Salt and light are not used simply by themselves. No one eats salt unless the person is suffering from some kind of metabolic efficiency. No one, unthinkingly, leaves the light on in an empty room, although there are probably some parents who've gotten hoarse telling their children to turn off unnecessary lights. The whole purpose of salt and light is to make a difference on, or for, something else. Salt is used to bring out the flavor of what it is working on, to season what otherwise might be bland, to untrap a flavor that might go unnoticed. Then, the total blend of ingredients in the recipe has more taste. The salt itself may be unrecognizable, but the whole dish will taste better because of the addition of just a pinch--whether it be meat, or soup, or even something sweet like a cake or pie. And light serves to illuminate beauty that might otherwise go unnoticed, or to alert one to dangers and perils that could lead to one's undoing. Again, salt and light are not ends in themselves; they never dominate that to which they are applied. Their sole purpose is to enhance, to bring out, to improve the mix to which they are added.

As "salt" and "light," as followers of Jesus who was the "Man for Others," we are called to live lives similar to what was distinctive of His--to be identified for pursuing goals that are not always self-serving, but that, likewise, can enhance the lives of those around us. In ancient times, the mark that made the Christian church stand out was its evident charity. "See how these Christians love one another," was a recurring comment among the pagans. The real boast that Christ's church should make is not about its institutional or political clout, but that is composed of people who care, people with compassion. It is then that we are "salt" and "light;" it is when we make a

difference for the better. We are not asked to do the impossible; we are not told that we have to like everyone we bump into, but we are called to enlarge our personal concerns to consider the needs of those less fortunate than ourselves.

Today's Gospel challenges us to reflect on how well we measure up to that task. Former president Jimmy Carter describes how he came to answer that challenge. He said he asked himself, if I were put on trial and accused of being a Christian, what kind of proof would a prosecutor bring against me to show that I was indeed a Christian? What kind of evidence could be produced; would it be merely guilt by association, that on Sunday mornings I was spotted with others who claimed to be Christian? Would the prosecutor quote something I had said, words professing my faith in Jesus Christ? Or could the prosecutor actually point to something I had actually done that proved beyond a reasonable doubt that I am a Christian? Recently I heard another politician, Sen. James Lankford from Oklahoma, express how he dealt with this question. He said that he came to realize that if his faith was just something he did on Sundays, that's not real faith. That's something more like a hobby, because a hobby is what you devote some spare time to on Sundays. Faith is about how one lives during the rest of the week.

Isaiah is the prophet that Jesus quotes most often, and today's first reading from Isaiah is pretty specific about what it means to be "light" in the world. "Share your bread with the hungry. Shelter the oppressed and the homeless; clothe the naked when you see them, and do not turn your back on your own." Isaiah goes on to give some more examples, "Remove from your midst oppression, false accusation and malicious speech; bestow your bread on the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted." Lent will begin in about two weeks. Any one of those challenges Isaiah sets before us could be the focus for a Lenten practice that will help us to live our faith in the most genuine way.

Not many weeks ago we celebrated the feast of Christmas and Epiphany, recalling Jesus as the "Light of the World"—the One who discloses God's presence in our midst. Today we celebrate ourselves as the church that is Christ's light in the world. As St. Teresa of Avila once wrote in her diary, "Christ has no arms and legs in the world but ours; we are His arms, we are His legs." By the compassionate character of our lives, we are called to be a continuing sign of His presence.

Like the cook adding salt to the stew, we are called to add the ingredient of the love of Christ to all the other solutions that are being offered for society's ills. If we are to be true to our name as "Christian," this is the distinctive quality we ought try to factor in whenever the bottom line is being drawn. It is a concern for the common

good. In these times of rampant self-interest, of single-issue politics, and looking out for Number One, the call to follow Christ is as necessary and demanding as ever. Let us pray that we can make a difference with what we offer, because of who we are, to make this world better for our having passed through.