

Epiphany 5 Matthew 5:13-20

Jesus often, as in today's gospel, described himself and his followers as being the light of the world. But what did he mean by using light to describe himself and us? What are the properties of light that he identified with?

Light is used to expose darkness: Darkness is expelled as soon as you turn on a light. But we are often unaware of how dark it is until we put the light on. How often have you been sat in a room doing a time-consuming job and over the course of an hour or so the room has gone from being filled with natural light to being quite dim. It is only when you get up and switch on a light, though, that you realise how dark it had become. It is the same in the way we live our lives, people are not aware of the darkness they live in if they don't see the light. The question is does my life help people see more clearly? As a person of light my function should be to dispel darkness where I find it.

Another function of light is as a guide: When we try to drive in the dark without lights it is dangerous. So as people of light we need to be guides to people who are in darkness. In our lives there are opportunities to encounter people living without the knowledge of God's love, in darkness of unbelief but we sometimes lack the courage to offer ourselves as guiding lights to others.

The third main function of light is to be seen: there is no point lighting a lamp only to cover it up. In the same way there is no such thing as a secret Christian. We need to be a light at all times.

Our light should also shine for multiple purposes. It should shine so that people may see the light but also so that they may see other things illuminated because of the light. Our light shines not that people will be attracted to us but to the light of Jesus Christ.

But as well as light, our gospel reading describes us as salt. And salt, too, can describe Christian attributes just as light does. In salt is a necessity of life. In many societies through history it was so highly valued that it was used for money. The English word salary is derived from the Latin word Salarium which refers to the payments made to a Roman soldier with salt.

The main function of salt is seasoning our food. Despite the healthy message being that we should reduce our intake of salt, a little salt is vital for our well being. Even though salt is small and hardly noticeable it makes a difference when applied to the substance of the food. Salt was also used to preserve food in biblical times as it can be today.

Salt was also seen as a representation of friendship "It is a covenant of salt forever before the Lord with you and your descendants with you." (Numbers 18:19). So salt also represented a relationship. There is an old Arabic Saying "There is salt between us"

So when Jesus told those listening to the Sermon on the Mount, "You are the Salt of the Earth" he is talking about the silent witness of the Christian believer. It is the influence that

you can have over other people's lives. Christ is saying let your influence season people's lives for the kingdom. Salt changes things; a little salt can flavour a big pot of stew. It only takes a little Christian salt to flavour a whole community, neighbourhood or workplace.

Being the salt of the earth means mingling with people that are lost; we are not to draw away from society, we need to live in the world. As salt is mixed in food and flavours it by doing so, so we need to mix with people who have no flavour, those who have had no access to salt before, if we don't, who will? Being the salt of the earth is about showing true friendship, showing the friendship of Jesus.

Salt and light are different, though. Salt works silently, it is so small it is hard to notice on its own and when added to food it becomes invisible, yet its effects are clear enough. Light, on the other hand is visible. In order for it to work it needs to be seen. It is often easier in our society to be salt, to work quietly and without drawing attention to ourselves. It is often seen as a mark of humility which should be the aim of every Christian.

However, we need the light too. We need to be able to expose the darkness in society. We need to guide those people by our light, showing that however insignificant it can sometimes feel, our individual Christian witness can be a powerful force. And we need to be seen doing this, we need to stand up and be counted as Christians.

The idea that we can separate our religion from the rest of our lives is flawed. To live God's law we have to approach everything we do and every encounter with other people as Jesus did, with God's love in our hearts, only in this way can we get it right.

We end with a quotation which has been attributed to Mother Theresa although as with much on the internet it's not clear who originally wrote it.

"People are often unreasonable, irrational, and self-centred. Forgive them anyway.

If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives. Be kind anyway.

If you are successful, you will win some unfaithful friends and some genuine enemies.

Succeed anyway.

If you are honest and sincere people may deceive you. Be honest and sincere anyway.

What you spend years creating, others could destroy overnight. Create anyway.

If you find serenity and happiness, some may be jealous. Be happy anyway.

The good you do today, will often be forgotten. Do good anyway.

Give the best you have, and it will never be enough. Give your best anyway.

In the final analysis, it is between you and God. It was never between you and them anyway."

Amen