

# THE EMMAUS SERIES

## **FIFTH SUNDAY YEAR A**

Isaiah 58: 7-10

1 Corinthians 2: 1-5

Matthew 5: 13-16

## **You are the salt of the earth, the light of the world**

Today's gospel reading continues the Sermon on the Mount. The Beatitudes of Matthew ended with a reference to the 'abuse' and 'persecution' that will be the lot of those who heed the call of Jesus – no doubt reflecting the situation of a community of Jewish converts that have been expelled from the synagogue. Against this background, we can understand why Matthew now incorporates two parables of Jesus concerning the witness that is expected from his followers.

These brief but powerful parables put us in the presence of Jesus the teacher who made such an impression, as he appealed to the basic things of life familiar to all his hearers. Salt is a commodity prized by all peoples for its flavouring and preservative qualities. Though pure salt is very stable, the salt of common use, referred to by Jesus, was far from pure and could easily become useless. Light is such an eloquent symbol that all the world's religious traditions have appealed to it. As today's first reading reminds us, the prophets made use of this image. In the Isaian writings, God's people had not only found the light, they were called to be bearers of the light – 'I shall make you a light to the nations, so that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth' (Is 49:6). This great theme finds its ultimate expression in the Church, the final People of God - through our union with the Saviour, whose life is 'the light of all people' (Jn 1:4). For Matthew, therefore, the words of Jesus, 'You are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world', are addressed to the members of a community in the midst of rejection and difficulties, and in danger of losing heart. And for the Church down through the ages, as it has proclaimed the Sermon on the Mount, the words of Jesus are addressed to the Church as it faces similar situations. In the present moment of history, when the tide seems to be running strongly against the things the Saviour stands for, we know the temptation to lose heart before the task of evangelisation. But, as we hear the brave words of Jesus we should recognise their realism – as if Jesus anticipates these misgivings. The magnificent light that has been entrusted to us, bringing us life and hope, must not be 'put under a tub'. The Church community must offer its light to a desperate and struggling world, like a beautiful city built on a hilltop. If we have received this charge from him, we can rely upon the help that only he can give.

Even the great Paul, whose witness to faith in Christ has proved to be fundamental in the life of the Church since the beginning, came to recognise – as we are reminded in today's second reading - that the sharing of his faith did not depend upon brilliant oratory or argumentation. Instead, the 'power of the Spirit' was made manifest through the sincerity of his simple faith in 'the crucified Christ'. And so, while Jesus tells us that we must be evangelisers, he also gives us practical advice as to how we are to give our 'witness' to the Good News he brings. Our light should 'shine', first and foremost, through the 'good works' that make it clear that we are true offspring of our 'Father in heaven'. The quality of truly Christian lives can change the world.

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