

Commentary on Sunday Scripture – Year A

Fifth Sunday on Ordinary Time

First reading:

(Isaiah 58.6-10)

Authentic Conversion

Look out! Lent is not far away! We need to start thinking again about genuine conversion, turning back to the Lord.

This passage comes far on in the Book of Isaiah, written when the Jews had returned from exile in Babylon, but still things were not going right for them, still the favour of the Lord did not seem to be upon them.

It makes a good examination of conscience: do I invite the homeless poor, share my advantages with others? Am I at peace with my family? Do I seek to dominate by the 'clenched fist', the wounding word, the put-down that can shrivel someone up?

Isaiah is contrasting genuine service of the Lord with the merely exterior practices of religion, the conventional ways in which we may seem to be 'holy' people. In fact, however, holiness is all a matter of the heart, and - at any rate in this text - mostly a matter of seeing and serving God in other people. That is the only way our light can really shine in the darkness, and our own wounds be healed over. As in the Beatitudes, God's demands always have a promise attached.

Question:

How would you define holiness?

Second reading:

(1 Corinthians 2.1-5)

The Secret of Paul's Success

What was the secret of Paul's success? At times he seems to us boastful, 'Take me as your pattern' (4.17) or 'Be united in imitating me' (Phil 3.17). He boasts of his faultless Jewish ancestry: 'Are they Hebrews? So am I' (2 Cor 11.22), etc.

He claims to have undergone for Christ more sufferings and persecutions than others (2 Cor 12), to have been perfect in the law (Phil 3.6), to have outstripped his contemporaries in his zeal for the law (Ga 1.14). He claims that he speaks in tongues more than any of them, and yet he does not make much of it (1 Cor 14.18).

Yet here he insists that he came among the Corinthians in weakness, in fear and great trembling in order to make known the power of the Spirit. In the same way, he will later admit that he holds the treasure of the light of Christ in fragile pots made of earthenware (2 Cor 4.7).

There are some wonderful rhetorical passages in Paul, where he exploits to the full the literary and oratorical training he had received, but, in the last analysis, one must admit that his power consists simply in the power of his message and the promises of Christ.

Question:

Is Paul conceited or boastful?

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Gospel:

(Matthew 5.13-16)

Salt and Light

Matthew here takes two piquant images from the words of Jesus that he found in Mark's Gospel and builds them up. Immediately after the Beatitudes, with which he began the Sermon on the Mount, he shows that these Christian attitudes are not just for our own benefit but are to change the world. The first is a warning, the second a promise.

Christians are to be salt for the whole world. Imagine a perpetual diet of food without any tang or taste, bland and insipid! This would be the world if Christians did not spread the message of Christ, did not impart to the world the flavour brought by Christ's message. What would the world be without that message and challenge of the generosity and salvation of Christ which we profess? Yes, of course, much of the same message may come to the world through other great world faiths, but the full challenge and the full promise is in Christ.

The same is true for the second image, that of light. Imagine a world of darkness, in which we had to feel our way and are never quite sure of shapes and purposes! And then what a difference occurs when the sun rises over the horizon or the light is switched on. Such is the difference that Christianity - and our Christianity - must make to the world.

Question:

How should the Christian set out to be salt and light to today's world?
