

9 February 2014

It's in our blood, sweat and tears. Too much of this substance and we die; too little of this substance, we also die. I am talking, of course, about salt and it is essential for life. In today's gospel, Jesus is using the example of salt before the time of refrigeration. Salt was used and still is used to preserve food. But if salt become tasteless, if it loses its 'saltiness', it really is good for nothing and thus it is thrown out to be trampled underfoot by people. In today's Gospel, Jesus is calling his disciples to literally be salt that preserves life, not to lose their 'saltiness', not to lose their effectiveness as disciples but to strengthen within their hearts the gift of faith. Today's gospel is a call to discipleship and these disciples have a mission; to enhance the life of the world, to transform the lived reality around them. As always, there is a directness in the words of Jesus. When salt becomes tasteless, there is no magic formula to make it salty again. It is gone, a lost opportunity, simply thrown out. For this community, faith is a prized commodity, precious like salt. Faith is not to lose its effectiveness or its flavour.

Jesus then uses another image to enhance the call and importance of discipleship. He calls his disciples to be light for the world. No one lights a lamp or a candle and then hides it away. The light must shine. Light scatters the darkness. Light draws people to itself. Jesus insists that his disciples are to be light shining in the sight of others and in so doing, will be a sign of God's providence and love. The image of light immediately evokes our call in baptism. A newly baptized child is enlightened by Christ, given the gift of faith, receives immediately from Jesus the call to love him, know him and serve him.

And as disciples, what are we called to do with these gifts of salt and light? The prophet Isaiah gives us a very good 'job description' in today's first reading – share your bread with the hungry, shelter the homeless poor, clothe the one you see to be naked, give relief to the oppressed. For Isaiah, it is a fundamental call to justice. A life given in the service of others, service given in the name of justice fills the world with light, a light that rises in the darkness. Isaiah was writing at a time challenging the people not simply to worship God in the temple, but to put their faith into action. This great call is before us and it is just as fresh for us today as it was for the people of Isaiah's time – justice, service, integrity.

The prophets in the Old Testament always have a particular concern for the poor, the marginalized, the suffering, the oppressed, those overlooked by society, the 'little ones'. The prophets are on their side because God is on their side. Many years ago, the Church described this as 'the preferential option for the poor', that is, the Church deliberately chooses to be on the side of the weak, the voiceless and the marginalized.

And here is the great challenge of the Gospel; Jesus wants his disciples not to take the gift of faith and lock it in a cupboard; he wants this gift of faith to be salt and light for the world – something that nurtures, transforms and gives life. Jesus wants his disciples to stand in that great line of prophets like Isaiah and speak out for justice, to love and serve the poor. In baptism, we receive this vocation and call from the Lord. In hearing the word of God and being nourished by it, we are challenged to take up 'the preferential option for the poor'. At a time when there are many challenges confronting Australian public life, the call to act with justice, fairness and compassion is always before us in our treatment of asylum seekers, refugees, indigenous Australians, the homeless, those who suffer mental illness, those who cannot find work, families who are broken.

The voice of the prophet Isaiah is strong, it is powerful and it is just as challenging today as it was centuries ago for the ancient people of the Old Testament – share your bread with the hungry, shelter the homeless poor, clothe the one who is naked, act with integrity and your light will shine.