

LIGHT OF THE WORLD

Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time – 5 February 2023



The theme of lights runs through our readings today.

First Reading - *“then will your light shine like the dawn”.*

Responsorial Psalm - *“A light rises in the darkness for the upright”.*

Gospel Acclamation verse - *“I am the Light of the world.”*

All readings build up to the climactic statement in the Gospel - *“You are the light of the world”.*

The First Reading features one of the Old Testament's great appeals for social justice. Israel has complained that much fasting on her part has met with no response from God. In reply, God says the “fast” Israel needs to undertake does not involve rituals and sacrifices but that Israel is socially just. By demonstrating hospitality to the weak, Israel would undoubtedly be a “light to shine like the dawn” and her “wound” to be “quickly healed over”. This is undoubtedly relevant in our generation – if we get social justice right, the kingdom should fall into place.

When social justice prevails in Israel, her “light rises in the darkness”. Here we echo the belief, expressed above all in Isaiah’s Servant Songs, that Israel’s destiny is to be “a light to the nations”. The prophet, then, is summoning Israel to realise her true vocation through implementing social justice. She is to become a “light to the nations” by modelling what a flourishing human society should be before the world.

In continuity with the vocation of Israel, the Church has the vocation both to preserve (“salt”) and to model (“light”) something for the rest of the world. To appreciate this, we must recall the Sermon setting: the mass of burdened, afflicted humanity described as the recipients of Jesus’ healing at the end of the preceding chapter. The sight of these crowds and their needs prompts Jesus to address his disciples in the following way. The implication is that it is people who are prepared to live according to the dispositions and attitudes pronounced “blessed” in the Beatitudes — that is, people prepared to live in the vulnerable, non-grasping way they propose — who can help lift humanity’s burdens, thereby becoming and remaining “salt of the earth” and “light of the world”.

The metaphor of ‘salt’ (preservation) is best explained through its role in food preservation before refrigeration. Salt can hardly lose its taste; however, when mixed with other elements, it loses its taste and becomes impure. Our reference to its ineffectiveness in today's gospel is it becomes impure and so good only for salting the path outside the house, where people will trample it underfoot. Disciples who fall away from their vocation may face a similar fate (vv. 14-16).

The metaphor of light was the archetypal Jerusalem that was considered the “city built on a hilltop” – a ‘great light’ and indeed “the light of the world.” Indeed, having been to Bethlehem and Jericho, I know Jerusalem at night is a great beacon. The disciples’ good works must function as a lamp giving light to a darkened world — not to draw attention to themselves (under a bushel basket) but to lead outsiders to the knowledge and praise of God, who has set them to be salt and light for the world.

This excellent set of readings challenges us, not only as individuals but as a parish, to reflect upon our vocation to be, according to the Second Vatican Council’s description of the Church, “the Light of the Nations” ([Lumen Gentium](#)), “salt of the earth”.

Deacon Clint McGoldrick

Readings: <https://bible.usccb.org/bible/readings/020523.cfm>