

## Epiphany 5A, Sunday,

Readings: Isaiah 58:1-12, Psalm 112:1-9, 1 Corinthians: 2:1-16, Matthew 5:13-20

### Salt!

#### Introduction

We have up to date thought about Christian faith *and* the world, Christian mission *in* the world, and conversion – *to whom and to what we are converted* – through three windows.

The first window involved the promotion of *peace and justice, justice and peace*: without the other, neither on its own is sufficient. For there to be peace there must be meaningful justice in the sense of equality, and for there to be justice there must be meaningful peace in the sense of workable and fair relationships between people and between groups.

The second window involved the Hebrew and Gospel idea of *Jubilee*: the vision of a new society, a new world, that included, as you may recall, four provisions for building structural justice in society: *the green dimension* – “respecting the environment as a partner in what it means to be human, leaving the soil fallow so that nature might rest, might recuperate”; *the economic dimension* – freeing people from their financial debts, so as to keep economies and societies viable and prosperous; *the social dimension* – liberating people who had fallen into slavery, so that society did not descend into a binary system of enslaved and enslavers, or as they say most vividly in Spanish, *verdugos y victimas* (hangmen and victims); and then, *the resource dimension* – the return to each individual of his/her family’s property, which may have been lost to what we call venture capitalists, so that society was not divided between those who owned capital and those who were totally dependent upon their labour and wages – low wages at that.

The third window involved the Beatitudes in Matthew’s Gospel – the beginning point for the Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed are, Happy are ....” Last week, we thought about the challenge of bringing to fruition such high behavioural benchmarks, such high ethical and political standards, given that Matthew is convinced perfection is possible for the Christian, although we noted that others, such as Martin Luther the reformer in the 1500s were less sanguine, less convinced. Suffice it to say, and I implied this last week: if we Christians, prefer “let out clauses” from the ethical demands of the Christian way, then I am unsure, that we can legitimately claim Christian identity. There is indisputably a cost to following Jesus Christ... that as the Mexican scholar, Jose Miranda puts it: “not everything is permitted”

#### The Gospel

Be that as it may, today we turn to a particular segment of the Sermon on the Mount, an elucidation, an application of the Beatitudes: the imperative to be salt, be light!

What does it mean? In Antiquity and before, salt was a medium of exchange: in fact, our word “salary” derives from it. If you traded salt for a poorly-performing slave, you would have said that the slave “was not worth his salt”. We can make three points about Jesus’ use of the idea of salt: first, that salt, apart from the obvious point of complementing flavour, preserves food, maintains the integrity of a thing. Second, salt in doing its job, also dissolves in the very act of performing its function: salt takes a low profile for itself. Third, the role of salt is that it does, it acts. It is then no coincidence, that centuries after the Sermon on the Mount, that Augustine speaks of the Christian convert as one who “does the truth” (*veritatem facere*). So, as we read this part of the Sermon on the Mount, we hear something that we tend to forget: namely that faith in Jesus is less about a body of knowledge, defending doctrine, but more about giving expression to Jesus and the kingdom, through living out the new Christian order of love in the deepest and

broadest senses possible. The late, Jacques Derrida, the contemporary Algerian-French philosopher, put it this way:

*"Living out the Christian confession results in doing the truth, which means only one thing: charitable justice". He continues, "this conversion turns (itself) towards the other in order to turn (itself) to God: the two movements, toward the other and toward God are in truth the same." God's people then in Jesus, "restore" the "breaches" in society. The gospel is done in public!*

## **Application**

Let's now turn to the 1986 movie, "The Mission". In the clip, we see an historical example of what it means to be *salt in history*: to complement and deepen history's flavour, and more importantly to defend human integrity, as the Jesuits resist the abuse, slavery and commodification of the indigenous Guarani people in the face of Hispanic capitalism. In the clip, we hear of the Jesuit struggle to build and maintain with the Guarani communities, independent plantations, independent cultural and economic units that provided dignity and all those things we have heard these last weeks from Scripture: the evangelical values of peace, justice and freedom.

The story of the Jesuit defence of the so called "*reducciones*", is gut-wrenching, but in the same breath, inspiring. It took place over a period of a century, until the Spanish handed the problem to the Portuguese, exposing the Guarani to even worse injustice. In the end, the Jesuits, who defended the indigenous communities with arms, were expelled from Spanish territory in 1767 and pressure was brought upon Pope Clement XVI to suppress them altogether. Under threat of a weakening church, as countries menaced Clement with breaking away from Rome, the Jesuits were suppressed by the Vatican for almost 50 years.

The Jesuits were salt, but to be so, exacted a price. To be salt is demanding, to be salt can be deadly. But that is the only way that the love of Christ will be ever taken seriously.

As I have worked and studied with the Jesuits over the years, their utter commitment to Jesus and the Kingdom has been ever so clear, ever so luminous. In their Spiritual Exercises, the means through which the disciple clarifies his purpose in his life, three questions are asked that have always stayed with me:

*What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? What will I do for Christ?*

They are questions fit for us all.