**5th SUNDAY OF THE YEAR**

**5th February 2023**

**First Reading Isaiah 58:7-10**

Isaiah Chapter 58 was written shortly after the return of the exiles from Babylon about 537 B.C. It addressed those who had arrived in Jerusalem and found it a heap of rubble. The terrain is limestone with a thin covering of poor soil. The elevation is 2,500 feet and winters are cruelly cold. The prophet was concerned that the wealthy should share their resources of food and shelter with those who had nothing.

Fasting ought to enable rich and poor alike to experience a common sense of weakness, only for the wealthy is it optional. For the rest it is compulsory.

Like Amos before him, Isaiah points out that real fasting, an expression of genuine religion, must be accompanied by also feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and sheltering the homeless.

The underlying message of the passage is that God is not impressed by a religious practice that has no concern for social justice. This doctrine is at the heart of the teaching of Jesus as outlined in the Beatitudes of last week.

**Responsorial Psalm: 111:4-9**

Psalm 111 sets out the characteristics of the just or righteous person in the style of the wisdom literature. Its intention is to relate the psalm to the Old Testament reading and the gospel, both of which speak of the righteous as a source of light.

**Second Reading 1 Corinthians 2:1-5**

In 51 A.D. Paul was in Athens, preaching his Gospel to a large audience on what is still called the the Areopagus hill. It is the only place we know of when he faced a Gentile audience and it is the only time when he used secular arguments. (Acts 17;16-34)

The audience would have contained Stoics and Epicureans and he had tried to use sophisticated philosophical arguments, with literary allusions in the style of the esteemed Greek orators. The occasion was not a success, and resulted in the remarks made in the letter to the Corinthian Church we have read to-day.

Frankly, are we surprised? By human logic Paul’s arguments must seem to be unconvincing. For one thing, is it not folly to look for eternal life to one who could not save himself from death?

It is also illogical that God should forgive us because we killed his Son. The cross, which is the key to Christianity, is the great sign of contradiction and is the proof that Christianity survives and makes progress through the power of God, not through human efforts.

At Athens his message was accepted by so few that they could be listed. (17;32-34) It was common for intellectuals to take pride in their abilities and Greeks did not take kindly to be accused of sin and weakness. Neither did the Corinthians, whose cliquishness and pride in wisdom, is wholly inconsistent with the gospel of the cross as they had received it through Paul's preaching.

Like other congregations they were vulnerable to Jewish evangelists who wanted Christianity to remain a sect of Judaism. On the other side, they were targets of Gnostics who preached a more appealing version of the Gospel.

Paul has only his weak words, yet God made these words the vehicle of his "Spirit and power." And, after all, they did bring the Corinthians to faith.

**Gospel Matthew 5:13-16**

The Beatitudes (last week) are the equivalent in Matthew’s mind to Moses’ Decalogue (Deuteronomy 5;6-21). The Decalogue is followed by the Torah which contains practical examples of what the Commandments mean in daily life. To-day’s reading is the introduction to the equivalent passage in Matthew which runs to Chapter 7.

It contains three analogies of how the Christian relates to the world in which he lives. Salt, light and a hilltop city. These three may have originally been given on different occasions and may have been brought together by ‘Matthew’ They do all have related, if not identical themes.

The Christian disciple is 'salt of the earth.' The best disciple of Jesus can never be satisfied with his own comfort or security. If he loves those whom God loves, he must be as concerned for them as God is and they must sense his concern as we can detect the presence of salt in food. The whole of life for the whole of humanity is made more palatable. If the disciples lose their sense of purpose and do not witness to the world, they have no other purpose and will be discarded.

Again, the idea of 'the light of the world' (John 8:12; see Matthew 4:12-17) is that the whole world benefits from its illumination. Christianity is not a subject that takes a place among other subjects, such as trades, hobbies, family life, etc, etc. Instead it is like a light that illuminates all the objects in a room. It reveals good and bad alike. It contains knowledge of what was previously hidden.

The idea of knowledge being understood as light was common to all ancient peoples, and from the earliest times. In the Jewish tradition, the Torah was a light for all people. (Proverbs 6;23) In 2 Corinthians 3, Paul describes the Torah shining so brightly on the face of Moses that his people could not look at him. For the Jew light demanded obedience. For the Greek it provided understanding.

In the Greek thinking world, in which Christianity grew, light had long been a subject of philosophy. It was used to illuminate the mind, but in Gnosticism was also the key to eternal life. Light as understanding underlies much of the New Testament. (See Genesis 1;3, John 8;12, Ephesians 1;18 and Hebrews 1;3) Of all four Gospels, John’s most clearly presents Jesus as the ultimate light. And as members of his body, his disciples are meant to enlighten in their measure.

They should be as conspicuous by their way of life as a village on a Galilean hillside. The Christian is a lamp designed to give light: one betrays one's calling if one lives only for oneself. Christians ought to bear witness to Christ before fellow Christians and before unbelievers. This is their calling. They do not have to go out of their way to do it; the authenticity of their lives is the best witness. And they do not act from self-seeking, for vain glory. Those who are brought to Christ by their witness will give the glory to the heavenly Father.

They are all those things, and that because Jesus has called them and they have responded. Rather, they are expected to manifest what they are: "Let your light so shine before men."

How is this done? By good works. Our text does not specify what these good works are. It is more concerned to insist that good works are not the meritorious deeds of the disciples themselves, for the world that sees them does not praise the disciples for them, but the heavenly Father.

The good works of disciples always point away from themselves to the grace of God through which they were wrought.