

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

February 13, 2014 at 10:01am

We must be the light of the world and the salt of the earth

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

I always find it fascinating and marvelous that when we're celebrating some special event, as we are today -- the 25th anniversary of Christ the Redeemer Parish -- we might be tempted to look for special readings, too, that we think might be appropriate for what we're celebrating. Yet if we just go to the readings that are assigned, as we do this Sunday, we discover that they totally fit the context of this event.

Twenty-five years ago, a small group of people gathered for the first time and became the community of disciples of Jesus called Christ the Redeemer Parish. And they would have been challenged, 25 years ago, to be the salt of the earth -- to preserve the goodness and the benefits of what Jesus teaches. But as a preservative, and to give it attractiveness, tastiness ... they were challenged to be light to the world around them -- a community of disciples that, by its very presence, sends forth a message that lights up the world and lights up the way of God for people to follow.

Now today, we are gathered to celebrate those 25 years, but also I think this is a good time to recommit ourselves -- this community of disciples gathered here, and in this area of the Archdiocese of Detroit -- to be the light for all people. This is a powerful message that is contained in the idea of being light. It's Jesus' drawing on a powerful, prophetic tradition when he challenges the community to be the light of the world and to give light for those who surround us.

Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Isaiah 58:7-10
Psalms 112:4-5, 6-7, 8-9
1 Corinthians 2:1-5
Matthew 5:13-16

That tradition goes back -- well, especially in other places, but especially the book of the prophet Isaiah. If you go back to Chapter 42, it's the first of what we call the Servant Songs in the book of Isaiah -- four passages that describe a servant who is called in a special way to be a sign, a proclamation of God's message. Commentators interpret the servant in different ways, some maybe a historic person at the time, but more generally, it's thought of as the people of Israel themselves being the servant of God.

In this passage in the 42nd chapter, the servant is acclaimed by God: "Here is my servant, whom I uphold; my chosen one, in whom I delight," and that servant is described then as not shouting or raising his voice, [a] proclamation not heard on the street; it's a servant that rejects a call to arms and power.

"And by that servant then, who is gentle, [a] broken reed the servant will not crush, the wavering wick the servant will not snuff out, and yet will bring true justice to the nations. I have called you for the sake of justice. I will hold your hand to make it firm. I will make you as a covenant to the people and as a light to the nations." Further on, in Chapter 49 in the second Servant Song, the servant has been called to bring the two parts of Israel back together in unity -- the kingdom of Judah, the kingdom of Israel.

They were separate and fighting each other. The servant is sent to bring them together, but actually, even before the servant can succeed in doing that, God says, "It is not enough that you be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob, to bring back the remnant of Israel. I will make you a light to the nations." So God's servant in this book of Isaiah is to be a light. The people of Israel, the people -- the chosen people -- are to be a light to all the nations.

Now here in today's Gospel, Matthew, writing for the community at that time, at the time Matthew's Gospel was put down in manuscripts, is re-emphasizing the call that Jesus gave in that Sermon on the Mount: "You are to be the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world." Not only is that text important for Matthew's community back in the first century, but now these words are spoken directly to all of us.

This community, Christ the Redeemer Parish, is to be a light like a city built on a mountain that everyone will see. You can't keep it hidden, and you do not light a lamp and cover it. Instead, you put it on a lampstand so everyone may see it. And so, as Jesus says, "Your light, the light of this community, must shine before others. Not so that you may be glorified, but rather that people will see the good you do and recognize God's presence here. And so praise God because of the light that you provide in a world that so often is dark."

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Now how does this happen? How do we become a light to the nations, a light to the world, a light to this world around us today? Well, our first lesson today -- from again the book of the prophet Isaiah [but] in a different part, Chapter 58 -- the prophet makes it very clear what it means to be a light. Talking about fasting -- the people were undergoing a fast, and yet it was only in externals. God was not pleased: "Is fasting merely bowing down one's head, making use of sackcloth and ashes? Would you call that fasting?"

Mere externals; no, no. "See the fast that pleases me," says God, "and here it is: Break the fetters of injustice. Unfasten the thongs of the yoke; set the oppressed free. Fast by sharing your food with the hungry, bringing to your house the homeless, clothing the one you see to be naked, and not turning away from your own kin." What happens when you begin to fast like that? "Then your light will break forth as the dawn and your healing come in a flash." That's how we become a light to those around us -- by carrying out this mandate given to us through the prophet Isaiah.

And isn't it true that in a very marvelous way, Pope Francis has become a light to the world? How many times has the pope been on the cover of *TIME* magazine as the person of the year? Once before, I think, but also this pope, besides being the person of the year, is on the cover of *Rolling Stone* magazine. People around the world, from every background and every religion, every age group -- they're fascinated by this pope.

But what's he doing? He's carrying out the message of Jesus. Not with words, not with just external signs, but by the things he does. We've been impressed, I'm sure, with how Pope Francis has broken down barriers. Holy Thursday -- the first Holy Thursday after he becomes pope -- he goes to the jail and kneels and washes people's feet. Prisoners -- those who are rejected from society for the most part, are not looked up to.

Francis kneels, washes their feet, and he provides a marvelous example of one who is humble, one who really understands that in the church, leadership in being servants, being a servant. He breaks down barriers because on that occasion, he washes the feet of women, which technically was not to be done, and even a Muslim. He breaks down those barriers that sometimes we set up between ourselves and other people of other faiths. We set up barriers between men and women, and Francis is breaking these down.

But also, he's so appealing because, according to various reports, not only has he appointed a special person to be his advocate for the poor and the homeless to go out into the streets of Rome and find out what's happening, but he himself has made trips quietly -- unnoticed -- to visit the poor and to bring comfort and solace and help to the poor.

Look what happened when that boat collapsed, that was grounded. A small boat, very unsafe, overloaded with people fleeing the violence going on in their country in North Africa and the poverty that was there, trying to find a way to provide a life for themselves, their families. When the boat shipwrecked, Francis went immediately to be there to comfort the people and to deplore the fact that people have to leave and then are rejected when they try to land. He makes a call: "We must look. These are our brothers and sisters. We must take them in."

So Francis has really shown us what it means to be a light. And perhaps to become very practical about it, these are the kinds of things that we must do, and we must do them as individuals. I'm sure all of us probably do make some effort to reach out to those who are in need, but we also have to -- and Francis has called our attention to this -- break down those structures that cause people to have to flee from where they live, cause people to be hungry.

Look: On Friday of this week, President [Barack] Obama was here in Michigan -- Michigan State University -- to sign the farm bill that will be our law for the next four years. Supposedly, this is a big thing to celebrate, and yet in that farm bill, do we realize that \$[8] billion over the next 10 years have been taken away from those who are the poorest in our nation? Those who must survive only on food stamps? Ninety dollars a month will be taken from their food allotment.

They will be forced to make choices: Pay the heat bill, buy food for the children. Over half the people

who are on food stamps are children. Yet we celebrate a farm bill that takes money away from them, and at the same time provides subsidies -- our federal dollars -- for the agricultural industry to support the agribusiness corporations.

How can this be? That we have such distorted values that we can't provide aid for the poorest among us, but we do provide aid for corporations in what's supposed to be a free market economy where everybody makes it on their own. Something's wrong; that's something we need to look at. Why would we not be deploring this bill, protesting against it? If we have to take money away from somewhere in order to provide the subsidies for the agricultural industry, take it away from somebody else, not the poorest.

But then also the other issue that I think is very troubling: One of the things that Isaiah says [is] that we must take in the homeless, the immigrants, those who are coming, desperately looking for a place to provide for their families. And here we are, spending millions -- tens of millions of dollars -- building a security wall to keep people out of our country, not able to cross our borders, and we have armed people guarding that border to push anybody back who try to come across. Where is our sense that we must shelter the homeless, take them in?

I have a friend who at the moment is visiting with refugees in Jordan. She is from the Catholic Worker in New York City, and they make it a regular part of their work to reach out to these refugees to become aware of what's happening, and to try to promote help for them. She's in Jordan, where there have been thousands and thousands of refugees pouring in from Iraq. Jordan's a very poor country, but they don't push them back. They take them in somehow.

And now it's happening even more with people flowing into Jordan from Syria. She describes in a letter she sent back about this trip: "I asked a Jordanian man how he felt about the massive influx of Syrians. He replied with concern, 'Yes, it's a problem. Syrians are taking even the lowly jobs. An employer can pay them 200 Jordanian dollars a month rather than the 300 Jordanian dollars he would pay a Jordanian. Of course, this causes anger.' But then he said, 'But what can we do? They are our brothers and sisters.' "

Is that not how we should feel about people trying to leave desperate situations of violence or economic injustice, trying to find a way to support their families, their children? "It's a problem," as he says, "but what can we do? They are our brothers and sisters." Isn't that what we need to do if we're going to fulfill what Jesus calls us to in today's Gospel, to be a light to the nations?

Over and over again, we should reflect on what the prophet Isaiah speaks to us today: "Here is the fast that I (God speaking), the fast that pleases me: breaking the fetters of injustice; setting the oppressed free; sharing your bread with the hungry; bringing to your home the homeless; clothing the ones you see to be naked. Then your light will break forth as the dawn."

The challenge to us today as we celebrate 25 years of Christ the Redeemer Parish and go into the future, the challenge to us is to be the salt of the earth, to be the light that shines in the darkness, to carry out what Jesus calls for in today's Gospel: "You are the light of the world. Your light must shine before others so that they may see the good you do and praise God in heaven." That's our call, and we must find now the ways to live out that call as this community of disciples of Jesus -- Christ the Redeemer Parish.

[Homily given at the 25th anniversary Mass for Christ the Redeemer Parish, Lake Orion, Mich. The transcripts of Bishop Gumbleton's homilies are posted weekly to NCRonline.org. Sign up here to receive an email alert when the latest homily is posted.]

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