

5th Sunday (A)

5th February 2026

'In the world, but not of the world'

Is 58: *your light shall break forth like the dawn.* 1Cor 2: *I proclaim to you the mystery of Christ crucified.* Mt 5:13–16: *salt of the earth ... light of the world ...*

As I said last Sunday, the area around Lake Galilee is a most beautiful and moving place to visit on pilgrimage. I hope that one day you do! In that part of the Holy Land, more than any other — apart from the Judaean wilderness, perhaps — one can still imagine, today, the events of Our Blessed Lord's life & ministry, so unspoilt is the landscape. Galilee is that whole area in the North of Israel where Jesus grew up and began His public life: Nazareth, Capernaum, Gennesaret, Magdala, Bethsaida, Cana, Tiberias ... places we've all heard of from the Gospel and it's the place, too, of the hillside where Our Lord delivered the Sermon on the Mount. We began hearing this text last week, with its first 12 verses, *the Beatitudes*. Today we continue to hear the beginnings of that great Sermon on the Mount, in which St Matthew collects so much astonishing, divine, teaching from Our Lord's lips.

Thinking of the Sermon on the Mount often takes me back to a particular film version of Our Lord's life ... not

one of the more famous modern films, but a 1964 black and white, by the Italian director, Pier-Paolo Pasolini, simply entitled, '[The Gospel According to Matthew](#).' The Christian message was perhaps an unusual pick for this director, a self-avowed Marxist and unbeliever, but it's a surprisingly reverent and straightforward telling of the Gospel: he uses many amateur actors, and local people as extras; his actor playing Jesus was only 19 at the time; he doesn't add material from outside the Gospel text; it's played straight to camera in a neo-realist style; and — even more surprisingly — he dedicates it to "the dear, joyous, familiar memory of [Pope] John XXIII," recently deceased. It wouldn't be to everyone's taste, as it's filmed quite differently to modern cinematographic style: long scenes, sometimes long silences, long swoops across the rugged and unforgiving landscape of Basilicata (S. Italy) standing in for the Holy Land. Why does this film leap to mind whenever I hear the Sermon on the Mount? Well, it's because Pasolini's film devotes a full 6-minutes, without interruption, to Our Lord's speaking substantial excerpts of

the Mathew text of the Sermon on the Mount: just the head of Our Lord — straight to camera, as the daylight changes to darkness and back again, the weather changes from fair to windy and stormy and back ... and all through, just the unstinting, almost unvaried delivery of these sacred teachings. Pasolini allows the Jesus's own words to 'speak for themselves,' and undistracted or undiluted, to impact our hearing and our heart. To Pasolini — the so-called 'Catholic Marxist,' the 'unbeliever with a nostalgia for belief,' whatever the real truth of his inner creed — the message of Jesus's Sermon on the Mount remains irreplaceable in its world-altering humaneness and divine truth. Mankind needs this Sermon, he realised: this teaching to live properly, and well, as a society at peace. We would do well to take seriously, our whole life long, the text of Mt 5-7 — rather as we said last week for the Beatitudes — as we will never tire of trying to live up to them. We must always be students of this Sermon, trying to internalize and imitate more perfectly this timeless teaching. Let's look at today's passage ...

As Jesus continues His Sermon on Mount, after the Beatitudes, He uses two images to inspire His disciples' understanding: *salt of the earth* and *light of the world*. Something I read about Galilee a while back pointed out the wide range of examples from daily Galilean life that Jesus uses in His preaching, to explain His message. It listed no fewer than 29 things: "wedding clothes and traditions; wineskins; sawdust in the eye; rotten fruit trees; bad building foundations; ravens & lilies; ploughing ..." the list went on and on ... "house lamps ... useless salt ..." These last two are the images that crop up in the Gospel today. Both would have been very familiar to His hearers: salt as the essential preserver of food in a hot country long before the days of refrigeration; and the oil-lamp, the only light in a household after dark, placed on a lampstand to light the whole house. They are very different but complementary images of what His people are to be.

1. SALT. Just as salt was (and is) an essential commodity of that time and ours, pervading the food it is to preserve, and has to flavour and season it by being

thoroughly absorbed, so the Christian is to be *in the world*, being precisely what preserves society, saves society ... by being the holy one in the midst of all others. We are called to be thoroughly immersed in the world and yet at the same time raising it up! Without us — without the essential presence of the faith in society, the world goes rotten, its flavour goes bad. That is the importance of who we are: we are *the salt of the earth*: the ones who by faith and prayer and example actually give a divine flavour to the world. We do not let it go thoroughly rotten, because we preserve it as a place filled with the grace and Spirit of Christ: we, in our bodies, in our lives, in our behaviour.

2. LIGHT. But we are also called to be *the light of the world*. This is complementary to the previous image. As light, we must stand out, be utterly different, be raised up high on a stand, shine the way for all to see. We must be lit by a flame of something worthy and true; fired with a faith that gives warmth and joy to those around. Light is a beacon for others to see and by

which they can see. It's a service to them, and a guide and something truly good.

So, as the saying goes, and as these two images imply, we are to be *in the world, but not of the world*: 'in' the world, *like salt*, friendly, affable, humane and attractive people, bringing a wholesomeness to society by being true to the Lord; and at the same time, 'not of' the world, *like light*, something heavenly and radiant and 'from above,' which challenges the world to achieve and follow something far higher, the light of the Lord. To be both, is perhaps the greatest challenge of the Gospel!! To be in the world, loving it, and helping it; and not of the world, keeping a certain distance and knowing that we are only pilgrims in this life.

Pope Benedict published three books of interviews with a German journalist Peter Seewald in his lifetime, and the first two are entitled: *Salt of the Earth* (1997) and *Light of the World* (2010). He too sees that these images are important to the Catholic, balancing the world and faith. We truly have something to give to the world that it cannot

have otherwise. God has something to give to the world that He cannot give except through faith and with our co-operation. We are not passive bystanders; *God uses us as the salt and the light.* He uses you to invigorate the world with the Gospel. Do not imagine that your faith is worthless; it's only worthless if you let the salt grow tasteless and your light go out! Don't let it! Remember how important you are to those around you, as a person of faith: they rely on you; they need your strength and prayer, your charity and your hope. You must give that spiritual flavour to life that comes from an understanding of what God made us for; and you must shed that clear light on life by having a vision of heaven as our intended destiny.

Jesus is counting on you to be that salt and light!

When I was in Rome at the start of the year I attended Pope Leo's first Wednesday audience of 2026, his first after the Holy Year ended. In the [catechetical address of that general audience](#) he announced that he would "begin a new cycle of catechesis ... dedicated to the Second Vatican Council and a re-reading of its Documents.

It is a valuable opportunity," he said, "to re-discover the beauty and the importance of this ecclesial event." What was Vatican II if not a great leap of faith in trying to engage constructively with the contemporary world in bringing it to savour the salt and light which Christianity is for the world's well-being? That's why the Council gave over its final conciliar Constitution (Dec 1965) to the giant topic of '[The Church in the Modern World.](#)' In a way, the whole of that great document is an analysis of the question of how as the Church we are to be 'in the world but not of the world.' Let me quote to you just a few stirring lines, as the Council fathers, 60 yrs ago, urged us to live out the Gospel as the Church, for the World:

The joy and the hope, the grief and the anguish, of the men of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and the hope, the grief and the anguish, of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community of men, of men who, united in Christ and guided by the Holy Spirit, press onwards towards the Kingdom of the Father and are bearers of a message of salvation intended for all men. (n.1)