HOMILY FOR SUNDAY ORDINARY 5 YEAR A

5 FEBRUARY 2017 ST BENET’S HALL

In today’s gospel, we hear that we are to be salt for the earth, light for the world. In this passage, which comes from St Matthew’s Gospel, just after the Beatitudes, we are told that we are to be a city built on a hill top, a light on the lampstand that gives light to all in the house. Our light is to be our good works.

The same image, more or less, is used in the first reading from towards the end of the book of the prophecy of Isaiah, with some more detail on these good works. Our light is to shine in the darkness of the world, and how? By sharing bread with the hungry, giving shelter to the homeless poor, clothing the man you see to be naked. These three acts of mercy seem to be a preparation for the list of six that will then come from the other end of Matthew’s gospel in the parable of the sheep and the goats, the ‘corporal works of mercy’, giving food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, visiting those who are sick and in prison.

Rightly we think that a good society will be kind, that it will have a delight in kindness, that it will be generous, open and welcoming, hospitable. How do we do? A recent report on charitable giving for the United Kingdom, looking at and assembling data for the year 2015 suggests that 41% of people surveyed report giving to charity from time to time and 30% monthly. In 2015 £185 million was raised by bake sales alone. 1 in 8 (12%) had given to charities supporting refugees. The top four destinations of giving were, in order, to charities for children, for medical research, animals, and hospitals or hospices. 70% of potential donors agreed that they would be more likely to give if they knew how their donation was directly helping.

Well I know: these are statistics plucked from a website. But if I may bring it closer to home, a reason in particular to be grateful for your generosity; last Lent in this small chapel and hall of St Benet’s there was a collection of £1,000 raised for two homeless charities, working on a problem directly in our field of vision, myopic though at times it may seem to us to be, and responding directly to the words of our opening reading ‘Share your bread with the hungry, and shelter the homeless poor’. One other specific example: I remember being very impressed organising lectures for sixth formers, hearing a presentation by the Catholic founder of the charity, Mary’s Meals, which aims to provide a meal for a poor child in the developing world in a place of education, thus trying to link solutions to the connected problems of hunger and ignorance. Its website says that 1,187,104 children are currently receiving Mary’s Meals daily worldwide; it acknowledges that this is but a small beginning.

Of course there are problems to face. Firstly there is a material problem, that what is done seems so small and inadequate. When is enough done individually or corporately to count as a light shining for the world, a city built on a hill top? Then there is a spiritual problem. Is not my little catalogue this morning, not just a little bit too much of smug confidence in charitable generosity for comfort? Look at our lights shining bright: that does not sound quite right, maybe it does not sound at all right. After all the beginning of the next chapter of St Matthew and of the Sermon on the Mount, the gospel which is read on Ash Wednesday in three and a half weeks’ time gives a fierce stricture on what I may seem to have been doing: ‘Be careful not to parade your uprightness in public to attract attention; otherwise you will lose all reward from your Father in heaven … when you give alms your left hand must not know what your right hand is doing; your almsgiving must be secret’. Is it thus that setting out to obey this morning’s gospel, to be a light set on a lampstand and a city built on a hilltop delivers one over to the darkness of pride and hypocrisy?

Clearly it can. So two thoughts ensue. Firstly this is not a light that originates in ourself; rather it comes to us as gift. We have no crumbs of love to share that we have not first been given. This is why we are here. Any love we have is created in God’s love for us. The prayers of the Catholic rite emphasise this repeatedly and the modern translation has been at pains to make this especially clear. So today’s opening Collect reminds us that our only recourse is to rely solely on the hope of heavenly grace. In the economy of the Latin phrase this is ‘sola spe gratiae caelestis’.

And then, secondly, if the light does not originate in us, nor are we its destination. Again this is captured by today’s liturgy in a very short phrase, the last one of the Gospel reading: ‘In the same way your light must shine in the sight of all people, so that, seeing your good works, they may give the praise to your Father in heaven’. The destination of the light is not ‘look at me’ but ‘give the praise to your father in heaven.’

In the parable of the sheep and the goats, the righteous are told that, unwittingly their works of love were in fact done to Christ. Our works of love are not done to, and will never be enough to, fill up a stagnant reservoir of self-love, but they, such as they are, created by God, will bring us back to God. As our first reading had it in its gentle and personal epiphany: ‘Your integrity will go before you and the glory of the Lord behind you. Cry, and the Lord will answer; call and he will say, “I am here”.’