

Gospel text

Matthew 5: 13-16

13 You are the salt of the earth. But if salt loses its properties, how can it exercise its role? It is useless, except to be thrown out to be trampled by passers-by. 14 You are the light of the world. A city on a mountain cannot go unnoticed; 15 we do not light a lamp and then place it under a piece of furniture, but we place it on its support so that it lights all those in the house. 16 So let your light shine before others, so that others may see your good deeds and recognize in it the extraordinary quality of being of your divine father.

Gospel commentary - Homily

The mission of being visible

Newspapers bring us the most diverse emotions. A few days ago, they announced to us that armed jihadist groups are spreading terror in Burkina Faso, this West African country, however peaceful. On a Monday morning in January, gunmen attacked Naraogo and broke into the village public market to open fire on the millet and peanut butter merchants and their customers. Balance sheet: 32 dead. The assassins then withdrew to another village, Alamou, killing four other civilians in their flight. How not to be heartbroken in front of so many horrors? And doesn't all of this help to tarnish the image of Islam?

In the same newspaper and the same day, a columnist tells the story of a woman who founded a house called: La rue des femmes (The street of women), which provides shelter and emergency aid to homeless women, but above all intends to treat their invisible wounds. More than 1,000 women are welcomed and cared for each year, and have access to a multitude of services (psychotherapy, art therapy, yoga, choir, etc.) that allow them to rebuild, no matter how long it takes. And one can hear their personal stories, like that of Kim, an Aboriginal woman, abused during her childhood by her father, before living for several years with an abusive partner, and who, after losing a job she loved, ended up on the street using crack cocaine. When she arrived at La rue des femmes, no one could approach her. She slept in emergency beds, sometimes on the floor on the kitchen floor. It was only gradually that one managed to tame her, to give her a space to rebuild herself, and after successful therapy, was able to return to work. Such a chronicle is essential so that we can hear from those who are light of the world.

There are two pieces of news, one that causes panic, the other hope. Why not read today's Gospel in this context? We are before a story of Matthew which tells us about the first great speech of Jesus on a mountain, like Moses at Sinai. But instead of giving us the Ten Commandments, the new Moses first gives us the Beatitudes: "Blessed are those who have a mind similar to the poor, blessed are those who accept to be afflicted, blessed are the meek...". But this new Moses not only presents the fundamental attitude of the Christian, but he illustrates the expected behavior with concrete examples, for instance: it is not enough not to kill, but to treat the other as an idiot is not worthy of a Christian. But Matthew is a true pastor. He knows this community with many Christian Jews whom he addresses; he really wants her to live the teaching of Jesus. So he takes a special approach. Let's look closely.

Matthew knows that, around the years 80 and 85, when he published his Gospel, many of the baptized have lost their initial impulse, they no longer feel motivated, all the more so since the promised return of Jesus does not happen. Above all, being of Jewish origin, they are disoriented now that the Law has become obsolete; without a benchmark, even their brotherly love has subsided. What is Matthew doing? Before offering them multiple examples of the action that Jesus expects from the Christian and that replaces the Law, he must first explain their importance. So he borrows the image of salt which loses its properties, and can no longer give flavor to food or help to preserve it, or even serve as fertilizer or catalyst for ovens; in this case, throw it out. Everyone understands through the image of salt that a Christian who no longer behaves like a Christian has lost his identity and can no longer live his mission, and therefore no longer has his place in the community and deserves to be kicked out.

After this warning, Matthew makes a great affirmation: the Christian is light of the world. What does that mean? A first response considers its negative aspect: just as a city on a high mountain cannot be hidden, so the Christian does not have the right to run away before his mission. To capture the importance of this mission which the Christian should not shirk, the image of the city on a mountain is borrowed from the prophet Isaiah that the Jews of the community knew well, where the prophet speaks of messianic times where the whole world will gather on the heights of Jerusalem to receive the light of the word of God. You cannot hide from such an important mission.

A second answer considers the positive aspect: being light of the world implies that one is visible, that one is in the right place, and not in a place where one will not be able to exercise his mission. Matthew uses the image of a lamp which is one of the essential accessories of the house and which one certainly did not put under a piece of furniture, but on a central support allowing to light the whole room.

Now, Matthew can conclude by saying: shine with your good deeds, for it is the very being of God that you are going to reveal thus. In short, to be salt of the earth and light of the world by personal actions, it is the precise role of the Christian, because he received the teaching of Jesus on the beatitudes and on the way of living with the others, and he cannot avoid this mission; on the contrary, he must be as visible as possible, because what is at stake is the revelation to the world of the true identity of God.

This is what Matthew says to those members of the community who are demotivated and disoriented. We who receive the same word today, how do we react? Personally, when I look at the terror spread by the jihadists and their mess, I wonder: will the light of the Sermon on the mountain one day spread over our world? At the moment when I am inclined to despair, I read again the column on the Rue des Femmes which is for me this light which lights up our nights; because it reminds me that, in a less dramatic way, love and compassion infiltrate in many ways in this world; and I see the trace of God there.

And suddenly I realize: I too am the bearer of this light through my action. I must not hesitate in being visible, as this will allow others to believe that this supposedly compassionate God really exists, because He acts; and that will keep hope in the future.

-André Gilbert, Gatineau, January 2020