

PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME – YEAR A

First Reading Isaiah 58: 6–10

This passage comes from the end of the Book of Isaiah, which some scholars attribute to a writer known as 'Third Isaiah' (Trito-Isaiah, the author of Chapters 56–66). The writer is therefore distinct from the 'Second Isaiah' ('Deutero-Isaiah') associated with Chs. 40–55, and the historical Isaiah himself or Proto Isaiah (Chs. 1–39), who was writing in the eighth century BC. In contrast, this passage was perhaps written some time around 539 BC, after the Jews came back from their Babylonian exile.

But the rejoicing of their homecoming has now worn off. The previous verses in this chapter speak of the Jews' despondency; they fast to get God's favour, yet God seems to be absent: "Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?" they ask. (Isaiah 58: 3)

The Lord tells them through Isaiah of the sort of fast that pleases him. One-off gestures are not what is needed; what matters is a real change of heart, shown in a concern for social justice and a renewal of relationships. The Jews' faithfulness to God should be seen in what they do for the underprivileged. It is interesting that Matthew writes at the end of his gospel, in the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, that God's judgment at the end of times will depend on these same acts of charity (Matthew 25: 31–46).

Isaiah uses the 'if you do this, ... then this ...' sentence pattern, which makes his meaning very clear (see vv. 7–8; 10).

The outcome of these actions is the promise of light arising from darkness. It is this same image of the contrast between light and darkness which St John often uses in his Gospel (see John 3: 20–21, for example) and which Matthew uses in today's Gospel passage.



Gospel Matthew 5: 13–16

Symbolism of Salt

When Jesus uses the images of salt to drive home the significance of being a disciple, its vital role is readily understood. It was used as a spice and a preservative and was present in every household. The Greeks called salt *divine (theion)*, and the Romans said: 'There is nothing more useful than sun and salt' ('Sole et sale nihil utilius'). In the time of Jesus, salt was connected in people's minds with three special qualities: purity, preservation from corruption, and giving flavour to life.

Flavourless salt

Some suppose that the unusual idea of salt losing its flavour is in reference to the salt of the Dead Sea, because it is chemically impure and therefore could lose its taste. Another explanation offered is that ordinary Palestinian ovens were outdoors, built of stone on a base of tiles, and a thick bed of salt was laid under the tiled floor to retain the heat. After a certain length of time the salt perished. The tiles were then taken up, the salt removed and thrown on the road outside the door of the oven. It was thrown away because it had lost its power.

Light, universal symbol of good

The image of light is a universal one: in Matt. 4: 16 Jesus is likened to a light shining in the darkness. Jesus now uses this same image for his disciples.

When Jesus instructed his followers to be the lights of the world, he was demanding nothing less than they should be like himself.

Jesus was using an expression quite familiar to the Jews, who themselves spoke of Jerusalem as 'a light to the Gentiles'. Similarly, a famous Rabbi would often be referred to as 'a lamp of Israel'.

Lighting in Palestinian houses

The houses in Palestine were very dark, with only one small circular window about eighteen inches across. The lamp was like a sauce-bowl filled with oil, with the wick floating in it, and stood on a lampstand (no more than a roughly shaped branch of wood). When people left the house, they would take the lamp from its stand for safety, and put it under an earthen bushel measure, so that it would burn without risk until they returned.

