

In today's Gospel, we hear the voice of Jesus speaking directly to us: "You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world." These should be familiar words to most of us, as we've heard them proclaimed many times. And if we stop and think about it, these words might really make us feel good about ourselves. Jesus is addressing them to us, to all of His followers. And they are very complimentary. Jesus doesn't say, "Hopefully, one day you become the salt of the earth and the light of the world." He doesn't say, "I will make you, over time, to be like salt of the earth and light of the world".

But, rather, He looks at each and every one of us and says, "You **are** the salt of the earth and the light of the world." By virtue of our Baptism, we are salt and light for others. This should make us feel good that God thinks so much of us that He gives us this responsibility. And it is definitely a responsibility. Even though the words are encouraging and positive, they are also challenging.

What does it mean to be salt and light for others? What actions does this require of us? Well, a good place to begin in order to answer this question might be to look at the list of the traditional works of mercy. Now, Isaiah, in our first reading gives a nice overview of the corporal works of mercy. Feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless and clothing the naked. To this list can be added, giving drink to the thirsty, visiting the sick and the imprisoned, and burying the dead. These are the corporal works of mercy because they involve the physical person, the body. These are very important and very necessary for us to take seriously. And it seems that we do give these a pretty good amount of our time and energy.

There are other works of mercy, though and unfortunately, we don't hear as much about those as we do the corporal works. These are the spiritual works of mercy, and focus more on the soul and the spiritual life of others. It seems that maybe we don't give as much attention to these, though, because it's simpler and perhaps more rewarding to just tend to the physical needs of others. We enjoy being thanked when we volunteer at a food pantry, or drop off bags of our clothes to a clothing drive. We feel good when we're able to donate a little extra money to a worthy charity or make chicken soup for someone who is sick.

When it comes to the spiritual needs of others, though, our efforts aren't always appreciated. For example, one spiritual work of mercy is to correct the sinner, to let someone else know when they are in spiritual danger

and need to repent. This is often not an easy thing to do, and if we try, the reaction we get may not be one of gratitude and appreciation.

The same can be true for the second spiritual work of mercy, which is instructing the ignorant. If we speak up to inform someone about some truth of God or of His Church, we risk being labeled as “too dogmatic” or trying to force our beliefs on others. And while it usually is better to be gentle when teaching others, this still sometimes leads to a negative reaction from the person with whom we’re sharing the faith.

Another spiritual work of mercy is forgiving all injuries. This is definitely a tough one. It seems that when we feel slighted, or offended, by someone, our initial reaction is to get upset, and then, get even. To forgive all injuries, though, is to risk being seen as an easy target by those who willfully injure us. This could possibly open us up to receiving more offenses from these people, because they know we will not offer retribution. So, again, this isn’t easy, and probably doesn’t sound too appealing to us.

The same can be said for the rest of these spiritual works of mercy, too. Counseling the doubtful, bearing wrongs patiently and praying for the living and the dead. We might see these as good things, but maybe meant for others and not for us.

However, Jesus has told us that we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. This means these things are as much for us to do as for anyone else. We are called to put into practice all of the works of mercy, both the corporal and the spiritual. If we only focus on one of these lists, while neglecting the other, then our actions will always be incomplete and lacking. Rather, we need to embrace the fact that all of God’s children are composed of both body and soul. And this means that all of God’s children need to be taken care of, both physically and spiritually. Both are necessary.

The spiritual works may seem more demanding, and less rewarding, but does that mean they’re less important? If we truly care about one other, if we truly love one another, then, we will agree that it’s not enough to try to provide others with a better life here on earth. This is a good thing to do, but, again, it’s incomplete and lacking. If we truly want to accept the challenge of being the salt and the light for others, then we need to also strive to help them come to know Jesus and to receive the everlasting life in heaven that is waiting for us all.