

HOMILY
MASS OF THANKSGIVING - FEAST OF ST HILARY
TUESDAY 13 JANUARY 2015

This is a Mass of Thanksgiving. But the thanksgiving I am offering in this Mass is not for my consecration as a bishop but rather my thanks to Almighty God for the love, support and the nurture of my faith which I have received from the parishioners and religious in each of the parishes I have been privileged to serve as a priest within the Archdiocese of Birmingham.

My thanksgiving is also for the friendship I have enjoyed (and I hope will continue to enjoy!) from my brother priests in this diocese and for the wonderful example of the former and current Archbishops and Bishops of this great diocese, under whose gentle and understanding leadership my priestly ministry has been fostered and inspired. I offer this Mass in thanksgiving therefore for you.

In preparing for the celebration of this Mass today, I asked Archbishop Bernard's secretary, Fr Dominic, if we could use the prayers and readings for the Optional Memorial of St Hilary of Poitiers, whose Feast Day falls today, 13th January.

You know, it is a little known fact that St Hilary is the patron saint invoked against snake bites! A useful heavenly ally for many a priest or bishop, I suspect! However this was not the reason for my desire to seek his intercession on this day of celebration and thanksgiving. No, it was St Hilary's focused and determined mission to preach, teach and make known to others Christ, the loving Saviour, which he had come to know so intimately in his own life which was the reason for my choice.

St Hilary was a fourth century Bishop who expended much of his life trying to fight the deep divisions in the Church of his day. Divisions which were caused at that time by the Arian heresy. This heresy taught that Christ was not truly God; that Christ was not divine but only human.

As the Bishop of his native city of Poitiers, in what is now modern day France, Hilary mounted a vigorous defense of the divinity of Christ through his preaching and writings. Some of the bishops of that time who had fallen into the Arian

heresy tried to silence Hilary and, using their influence with the Emperor, forced Hilary into exile for three years. When eventually he was able to return from exile, Hilary resumed his pastoral activity: preaching, writing and taking care of the poor. After his death he was acclaimed a Saint and has since been proclaimed a Doctor of the Universal Church.

The life of Saint Hilary offers an important lesson to all of us: we must live what we believe; we must be a witness to the Truth and be willing and able to defend it in a way that is both gentle, compassionate and humble but also in a way that is strong, faithful and bold.

In the Gospel today, the passage which follows the proclamation of the Beatitudes, Jesus says to His disciples: "You are the salt of the earth. But if salt becomes tasteless, what can make it salty again? It is good for nothing, can only be thrown out to be trampled underfoot by people. You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill top cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp to put it under a tub; they put it on the lamp stand where it shines for everyone in the house. 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."

In the ancient biblical world, salt was a valuable and important necessity of life. Salt was used to preserve as well as to season food. In addition to its use with food, salt was strewn on sacrifices – both cereal offerings and burnt offerings. It was used for making covenants and representing commitment: "You shall not omit from your grain offerings the salt of the covenant with your God; with all your offerings you shall offer salt" (Leviticus 2:13).

When Jesus proclaims those words to His disciples, it is not a request that he makes of them but a statement of fact. He does not say 'Become the salt of the earth', 'Become the light of the world', but 'you are'.

As exemplified by the life of St Hilary, Christian discipleship means that we must live what we believe. We must be a witness to the Truth and be willing and able to defend it. If we believe in something, we should desire to be that thing. Represent it. Live for it. As adopted children of God through our baptism, it is in our very nature as disciples of Christ to be hope for the world, its salt and light.

The concern that “salt becomes tasteless” is difficult for us to understand today, especially because of the purity of the salt we use. In the time of Jesus, salt was not purified in the way that we know but was collected from deposits left by the Dead Sea as it dried. This salt was exposed to the elements and could break apart and lose its flavour. Such salt is a very appropriate metaphor for Christian discipleship, which can and does lose its vigour over time if care is not taken to keep it alive.

In one of his Sunday Angelus messages to the faithful gathered in St Peter's Square, Pope Francis said: “All of us who are baptized, are missionary disciples and we are called to become a living gospel in the world; with a holy life we will give 'taste' to the different spheres of society, and defend them from corruption just as salt does; and we will bring the light of Christ, with the witness of a genuine charity. But if we Christians lose our taste and extinguish our presence as salt and light we will lose effectiveness.”

The passage we have heard today from St Matthew's Gospel inspires me. It inspires me because Jesus tells his disciples that they are salt and light. But he does not say this after they have come to a fullness of faith in him, when they have witnessed his resurrection from the dead. No, he affirms this of them when they were still weak and vulnerable disciples, prone to misunderstanding his teaching, failing to be totally faithful to him and ready to desert him when they faced the prospect of suffering and persecution.

We can take great hope from that! In Christ's eyes we are not the sum of our weaknesses and failures; rather, as true God he sees us through the eyes of His Father. In His eyes we are the sum of the Father's love for us and of our real capacity as baptised Christians to be the image of his Son. He reveals to us our true human dignity and our eternal destiny.

In offering this Mass, I do so in thanksgiving for the love, support and example of faith which the Archbishops, auxiliary bishops, priests, deacons, religious and the faithful of this diocese have given to me over the years. In each parish that I have had the privilege of serving in as a priest, I have always left that parish receiving far more than I ever gave.

With that thought in mind, I very much wish to emphasise, and make my own, the words of Our Lord in the Gospel, and say to each one of you: “you are the salt of the earth”, “you are the light of the world”.

In his treatise, *On the Trinity*, St Hilary wrote of the desire he had to remain faithful to his baptismal vows. Today, on his Feast Day, let us make this prayer of Saint Hilary our very own:

“Obtain, O Lord, that I may keep ever faithful to what I have professed in the symbol of my regeneration, when I was baptized in the Father, in the Son and in the Holy Spirit. That I may worship you, our Father, and with you, your Son; that I may deserve your Holy Spirit, who proceeds from you through your Only Begotten Son. Amen.”

Finally, I wish to assure you of my prayers for you all and, just as over the previous 27 years you have so generously supported my ministry as a priest in this Archdiocese with your affection and your prayers, so now I ask you, I beg you, to continue to support me in my ministry as a bishop with your friendship and, most importantly, with your prayers.

✠ Marcus Stock
Bishop of Leeds