

5th Sunday Ordinary time Year A

There was once a great biblical scholar who was also noted for his great piety. He spent hours every day secluded in his room studying the Scripture and praying and meditating. One day a holy man visited the town in which the scholar lived. On hearing about it, the scholar set out to look for him.

He looked first in the church, but did not find him there. Then he looked in a local shrine, but he wasn't there either. He looked in other likely places – but failed to find him. Eventually he found him in the marketplace.

On meeting him he told him who he was, and how he spent hours every day in the study of the scripture and in prayer and meditation. Then he said, "I have come to seek your advice on how I might grow in the service of God?"

The advice he got was simple and direct. Looking at him intently, the holy man said, "It's easy to be a sage and saint in your room. You should go out into the marketplace – and try and be a saint there."

The story doesn't go on to tell us whether the scholar had the courage to act on the advice of the holy man. The holy man in the story is really just echoing the words of Jesus.

Jesus is speaking directly to each one of us here today when he says "your light must shine in the sight of men, so that, seeing your good works, they may give the praise to your Father in heaven."

The point of the story is not that studying the Bible or spending time in prayer is a bad thing; of course they are not. Nor is it to say that we should simply be spending all our time as social workers helping those in need.

Jesus is telling us that when we combine the two; when we do good works and care for all, but do all that in a spirit of prayer; then there is great power.

Power to change the world.

We are called to be Holy. When we ask the Holy Spirit to fill us with the Spirit of God we will be "set on fire....and people will come to watch us burn."

St Paul reminds us in his 2nd letter to Timothy that we need to fan into a flame the gift God has given us in baptism, "God's gift was not a spirit of timidity but the spirit of power, and love and self-control. We are never to be ashamed of witnessing to the Lord."

I can remember, when I was a schoolboy in the mid 70's in Birmingham, that most school assemblies and school Masses would often include the hymn "They will know we are Christians by our love". I must admit, it is not one of my favourite hymns – in fact it probably wouldn't even get into my top 100...but I have always been struck by those words. It is not a bad thing to ask ourselves; "Do people know we are Christians by our love?" does love shine out and bring others to know and love Christ? Because if it doesn't, we need to address that.

We hear in the book of Joshua (1:9) that God commands us to be strong and courageous; and our prayer after communion today will urge us to "live that, made one in Christ, we may joyfully bear fruit for the salvation of the world."

That may seem daunting or even unrealistic but we are told, "do not be frightened and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go."

I don't imagine it will surprise you when I say I'd like to finish with a Mother Teresa story. Well, actually, it is a story about one of her Missionaries Sisters of Charity.

"One day a man visited Mother Teresa's home for the poor and dying in Calcutta. He arrived just as the Sisters were bringing in some of the dying off the streets. They had picked up a man out of the gutter, and he was covered with dirt and sores. Without knowing that she was being watched, one of the Sisters began to care for the dying man. The visitor kept watching the Sister as she worked. He saw how tenderly she cared for the patient. He noticed how, as she washed the man, she smiled at him. She did not miss a detail in her attentive care for that dying man.

After carefully watching the Sister, the visitor turned to Mother Teresa and said "When I came here today I didn't believe in God, and my heart was full of hate. But now I'm leaving here believing in God. I have seen the love of God in action. Through the hands of that Sister, through her tenderness, through her gestures which were so full of love for that wretched man. I have seen God's love descend upon him. Now I believe."

"In the same way your light must shine in sight of men, so that, seeing your good works, they may give the praise to your Father in heaven." Matthew 5:16