

Fifth Sunday *per annum*

Year A, 2026

Is 58:7-10

1 Cor 2:1-5

Ps 112

Mt 5:13-16

Light in darkness; resistance to wisdom

The convenience of electricity makes us forgetful of what darkness is, how limiting it is, and what a triumph it is to be able to flip a switch and produce light, all the light we could want. Electric light now has become so widespread that it is actually a problem in many places, especially urban places, where we now speak of light pollution. Now before electricity, light was produced by open flames, carefully tamed by immersing wicks in wax or oil. The idea was that in order to conquer the darkness of the night people had to make their own light. If they didn't want to just wait for the sun to come up, people had to do something ... light a fire, strike a match, something had to be done, something had to catch flame.

Here we're talking about physical darkness conquered by man-made light. But what about moral or spiritual darkness? What about cultural or societal darkness? This is what the prophet Isaiah addresses in our first reading. Speaking through the prophet, the Lord reminds his people of all that he had (already) commanded them in the Law.

If they will but share their bread with the hungry, shelter the oppressed and the homeless, clothe the naked when they see them, and not turn their back on their own, then, God says, "*your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your wound shall be quickly healed.*" Do these things, God says, and you will bring about light and

healing. Do these things, God says, and when you call upon me for help, I will answer, I will be present, I will deliver you. When we do what God commands, these deeds produce light and healing – spiritual and moral light that heals the land and its people.

This passage from Isaiah contains a second list of things to do in order to make light. Again, God speaks: remove from your midst oppression, false accusation, malicious speech; bestow bread upon the hungry; satisfy the afflicted. The result? Light will arise like the dawn to banish darkness and gloom.

The message is not hard to understand. These are things that must be done, not just talked about. God has given commands the wisdom of which is immediately apparent for anyone who has any understanding.

But here is the test, not of our understanding, but of our willingness to act: are we *doers* of God's word or *debaters* of his commands? Debaters prefer to quarrel and quibble over God's words instead of acting upon them. They prefer hesitation and procrastination. This is not wisdom. It is wickedness. Parsing definitions as a pretext not to act was a tactic of the Pharisees, one that Jesus condemned (Mk 7:8-12).

The hungry, the oppressed, the homeless, the naked, the afflicted: will we debate who belongs to these categories so as to exclude as many as possible, so as to do as little as possible or will we act with a generous spirit according to the spirit of what God commands?

Which do you think is more in line with what God expects of us, to take an expansive view of these terms or a restrictive one?

The hungry? *I'm not paying for fat people to eat.* The oppressed? *This is a free country. Fail or succeed on your own. Sink or swim!* The homeless? The naked? *I worked for my house and clothes. Let them get a job and work for their stuff!* The afflicted? *Bums, addicts, crazies – just lock them up.*

So much for getting rid of oppression, false accusation, and malicious speech! So much for not turning our backs on our own! That expression “not turning our backs on our own,” properly interpreted, is a bit of prophetic irony, brought to perfection in the teachings of Jesus. Wasn't it precisely this sinful attitude that was part of the parable of the Good Samaritan? *“Which of these three, in your opinion, was neighbor to the robbers' victim?”* (Lk 10:36). That parable exposes the morally compromised heart that parses words – the word neighbor in this case – in an attempt to exonerate itself from having to take action upon the commandments of God.

Who are we kidding? Are we mocking God (Gal 6:7)? We know better, and still we stall. Do you think God will be convinced by our excuses for inaction? We barely convince ourselves. In another place in the prophet Isaiah, God shows that he is on to our scheming: *“For the fool speaks folly, planning evil in his heart: how to do wickedness, to speak perversely against the Lord, to let the hungry go empty and the thirsty be without drink... to ruin the poor with lies and*

the needy when they plead their case” (Is 32:6-7). We are fools if we think God is fooled.

If you think it comes off poorly when politicians try to explain to the Pope how he’s got it all wrong about how Christians are meant to respond to the forces of dehumanization in our own day, then just wait and see how it comes across when we try to explain to God on the last day how we saw fit to set aside his commands because we had better ideas, because our social and economic policy preferences were more “realistic” than his clear commands. This is both foolishness of mind and hardness of heart. *“If today your hear his voice, harden not your hearts” (Ps 95:7-8). We’ll be trying to justify our pretexts for inaction from the darkness and not from the light. “And if the light in you is darkness, how great will the darkness be” (Mt 6:23).*

To bring spiritual light to our world, to bring about a renewal of our society, all we have to do is be faithful to God’s commands and *actually do* the things he says to do, on an individual level and on a societal level. *Do* these things, and a new light will shine.

And yet we resist such wisdom, we fight against the coming of the light. *“And this is the verdict, that the light came into the world, but people preferred darkness to light, because their works were evil” (Jn 3:19).* Jesus is the light of God who came into the world to teach us, again, what the prophets long before had taught: that when we carry out the commands of God, walk in his ways, obey his voice, we make light, we become light, and everything gets better. But we

resist. And we resist because we are fools who prefer darkness to light.

This is not an intellectual problem. It is a moral problem. The problem is not in our understanding. The problem is in our choosing to act (or, more precisely, not to act): a moral problem.

It's not that we don't understand what God is saying to us, what God expects of us. It's that we find excuses to set aside the word of God because his commands are inconvenient to how we want the world to be and to how we want to be in the world.

But this is not wisdom. It is foolishness, folly, stupidity. And it is dangerous. Why is the fool, why is folly so dangerous? The problem with folly, and its danger, especially on a spiritual and moral level, is that it thinks it's right. The fool thinks he's wise and suffers no doubts about his "wisdom." He has absolute certainty. And no amount of contrary evidence will convince him, make him see things differently, cause him to change his mind. When facts are brought to bear that contradict personal prejudices, those facts are disbelieved and denied. And when the facts are undeniable, they're dismissed as exceptions. And when they can't be dismissed or defended, watch out for aggressive and hostile attitudes, words, deeds. The fool is never wrong. And if you try to show him he's wrong, beware. Fools are no joke. They are dangerous. There is no use arguing with such foolishness because it will never see reason; it is inured against understanding. And if the wisdom in you is foolishness, how great will your folly be!

Let me give you an example from everyday life of how detestable and dangerous such folly is. We can easily imagine the conversation: "Not my child. My child would never do that. Never lie. Never say such a thing." Here's the evidence to the contrary. "How dare you!" And here comes the foul language, the wild rage, the yelling, the accusations, the threats, the violence. These people are not deceived. They know their child is in the wrong. This is not a problem of the intellect. It is a problem of the will, a moral problem.

The cure is not more information. The evidence is clear. The antidote is not more education. They understand well. The answer is not a better explanation. It's not that they don't understand – which would be an intellectual problem – it's that they want not to understand. And such wanting, such a will, is evil. This is a moral problem.

What can we do, then, in the face of such evil, such folly, such a refusal to see what is plain to see? The answer, I am convinced, is to be found in our second reading from St Paul's letter to the Corinthians. Paul is done trying to convince the foolish. He has given up the "sublimity of words" and trying to reason with the haters. He says: I now come to you weak and afraid and trembling – the fools are corrupt and violent and threatening – "not with persuasive words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of Spirit and power," he says. Paul acts, demonstrates, the Spirit and the power of God. What does that look like? It looks like the works of God himself.

When fools rage, the wise seek peace. When fools tear down, the wise build up. When fools curse, the wise bless. When fools take, the wise give. When fools bring down darkness, the wise ... spread light. They perform the works of light, as taught by the prophet Isaiah. They become light, as commanded by Jesus: “your light *must* shine before others, that they may see your good deeds.

It's not information, explanation, education that fools need. It's redemption, which is light. If someone in the grip of folly is to be rescued, it will not be because of words, but because of deeds, because a deed of light shined on them or near them, and the light of grace touched their heart, producing repentance, conversion, and a return to the ways of wisdom and peace.

Jesus himself teaches this. Your light must not be hidden. It must shine out brightly. Others must see your good deeds – the deeds of light – and, seeing them, they will give glory to your heavenly Father.

What's the old saying? It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness. Wisdom is light, a candle in the darkness. When the diabolical and dehumanizing darkness of arrogant folly is near, words, however true and wise, are all but useless. What is called for is action: a work of light. Bring light. Be light. And like St Paul, you will have made a demonstration of Spirit and power, which alone can redeem and heal. Do this, and you will bring glory to your heavenly Father. This is wisdom, and its works are light.