February 5, 2017
Fifth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Is 58:7-10
Ps 112:4-5, 6-7, 8-9
1 Cor 2:1-5
Mt 5:13-16

by Joe Serano, o.praem.

Today’s reading from Isaiah 58 is a key passage for understanding the Bible’s teaching on “social justice”. The prophet’s call to feed the hungry, shelter the homeless and cloth the naked provides the pivotal backdrop to the famous passage in Matthew 25 about the final judgment. Ultimately, the test of discipleship is our seeing (or not seeing) the face of Christ in the “least” of our brothers and sisters.

Twice Isaiah 58 also mentions “light”, teaching that when we share our bread “light breaks forth like the day” and again “light shall arise in the darkness”. Those lines seem a natural link to the words of today’s Gospel which call believers to “let their light shine” and indeed to be the “light of the world”.

Light and darkness, a perfect contrast for describing the difference between standing with the oppressed and being blind to their presence among us. To be blind is to be in darkness, but in the light we can see and respond to our neighbor in need. To go a step farther, our “faith” acts as a “light” so that we can recognize the face of Christ in the vulnerable and the marginalized in our society.

Scripture is very clear. “You can’t love the God you don’t see unless you love the neighbor you do see.” What Isaiah and Matthew teach us today is that our neighbor includes more than our family and those who are like us. We believe in a God with wide arms, who has room for all people who are in need — and we are called to be a church with wide arms.

Pope Francis, like Saint John Paul II before him, consistently speaks of the need for “solidarity” — standing with those whom others would exclude. Thus, despite the legitimate fear and anger provoked by acts of terrorism (a huge part of the “darkness” among us), the Gospel calls us to resist the forces that would divide the world into “us” and “them”. Quite the contrary: if we are to be carriers of the “light”, we have to get beyond our fears and redirect the passion of our anger and work for reconciliation and concord.

Challenging. Difficult. Somedays just impossible. But, that is why we move from the Book to the Table, where the Bread will be broken and the Wine poured out — a sacrament, a sign of our own call to break ourselves open and pour ourselves out. But it can still seem beyond us, which is precisely why we go the Table to be fed ourselves, to be nourished with a Power beyond ourselves — that we might do our part that the Kingdom might come, just a little more this day.
Fr. Joseph Serano, O. Praem., a Philadelphia native, studied at St. Norbert College, Heythrop Athenaeum in Oxford, England, and the University of Pennsylvania along with a semester of Scripture study in Jerusalem. He received his doctorate of sacred theology from Catholic University and began teaching at the college level. He has served as director of Daylesford Abbey’s Institute for Religion and Culture and is currently ministering as the Treasurer of Daylesford Abbey.