

First Reading: Jer 31, 31-34
Second Reading: Heb 5, 7-9
Gospel: Jn 12, 20-33

Salt and Light- a call for new life

In just two weeks time, we Christians will be celebrating the great feast of Easter. And you and I will bring to a close this Season of Lent, when we have been reflecting on the very important meeting coming up later this year when four of our Zambian bishops join hundreds of other bishops for the Second African Synod.

In the First Reading for this Fifth Sunday of Lent, we hear Jeremiah echo the Lord's promise of a "new covenant" with the people, a new Law of Love to guide their lives. That is really what we can look to the Second African Synod to help us understand better and put into practice more effectively, a Law of Love that brings reconciliation, justice and peace.

In Zambia today we can be very proud and grateful that our churches – Protestant, Evangelical and Catholic – cooperate in many wonderful ways to serve the people in the fullest sense of evangelisation. That means bringing the Good News into every part of people's lives – spiritual, social, physical, political, etc. We are already alive with the Synod's spirit, though we still have a long ways to go to become even more fully alive!

The Synod theme grounds itself in a very familiar scripture quotation from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount: "You are the salt of the earth...You are the light of the world" (Matthew 5: 13-14). That's what we want our Church in Zambia to be: more "salty" with the good flavour of God's word, more "light-filled" showing us the paths to follow in the future. The Synod's preparatory document says that these words of the Lord are an invitation to us all "to be workers of reconciliation and peace and promoters of justice" (Lineamenta #92).

But sometimes here in Zambia we hear people – even members of our own communities – criticise the Catholic Church for paying so much attention to justice issues. Shouldn't the Church just stick to preaching the Gospel? Shouldn't our bishops and priests focus on spiritual matters, on getting people into heaven? All this justice talk and action, isn't that political? And the church should never be political!

Have you ever heard questions and sentiments like that? Well, it is to be expected that when our Zambian Catholic Church does speak out on social issues, on our own or in cooperation with other churches, it will be challenged and criticised. Remember that Jesus himself, when he criticised the rulers of his day, the leaders of the Synagogue and prominent people like the Scribes and Pharisees, was attacked and eventually put to death!

The Gospel of John we heard today contains a very challenging remark of Jesus: "If a person serves me, that person must follow me." Following Jesus is not simply coming to church to sing songs and clap hands! Following Jesus is not simply reading scriptures and reciting prayers. No, following Jesus is to share in his mission, a mission he expressed so obviously when he said: "I have come that you might have life, and have life abundantly" (John 10:10).

What that abundant life is all about, and what it means in the everyday scene of Zambia today, is what the Second African Synod will be helping us understand and implement. Just listen to a powerful statement in the Synod's preparatory document:

Christ heals and sends us, in turn, to save and heal others (see *Luke 9:6; Mark 16:15-20*), not to transmit spiritual goods only, but to save the body along with the soul. The mission of Christ and Christians, as we have already said, is to save the whole person (see *Luke 4:18ff*). Precisely in today's Africa, each person must be saved through not only liberation of the spirit but liberation from war - internal and external -, economic exploitation, hunger, sickness, tribalism, injustices, dictatorship and corruption of all kinds. The problems of healing are not limited to the religious sphere alone; they also include and presuppose the political, economic and cultural spheres.

There are various kinds of healing. In a political commitment, as in any commitment to improve living conditions, health and peoples' culture, we bring about a kind of healing. In fact, Christ cannot be seen as a Healer unless Christians commit themselves to liberate modern Africa from all the evils which are suffocating the continent, particularly the evil of war.

That's a very strong call to action and one that we Christians can follow with great confidence, knowing that we are following Jesus himself! That's what makes our preparation for this coming Second African Synod so exciting and so encouraging. It is really a call to come closer to Jesus and his mission of reconciliation, justice and peace. It is work for that "new covenant" that we want to be part of, a new Law of Love that will make a big difference in our personal lives, the lives of our Small Christian Communities and parishes, and our beloved and blessed country, Zambia!

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND SHARING IN SMALL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

- How can the Church in Zambia be both a strong spiritual force and also a strong political influence?
- Do you have any contact with the Justice and Peace groups of the Catholic Church? What is your impression, evaluation, of their work?
- If you were to ask our Zambian bishops to take one particular issue to the Second African Synod, what would it be?

SKETCH

Have a person going in to vote in a polling station, looking very confused. Have another person go in with confidence and a smile, carrying a sheet of paper that could be a pastoral letter from our Church.

COMMUNITY PRAYERS

- We pray, Lord, that our churches in Zambia will cooperate together to bring true reconciliation, justice and peace to our country. *Lord, hear our prayer! Lord graciously hear us!*
- We pray, Lord, the our Justice and Peace committees around the country may help the people be good citizens. *Lord, hear our prayer! Lord graciously hear us!*
- We pray, Lord, for a successful Second African Synod that will benefit all the peoples of Africa. *Lord, hear our prayer! Lord graciously hear us!*