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## HOMILY FOR THE CHRISTIAN SERVICE

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In today's Gospel, Christians are called to be the salt of the earth. As a concept, however, salt is a little ambiguous: it seasons food and brings out its flavour, but if a meal has too much salt it quickly becomes inedible. The sense in which Christ calls Christians to be salt is clear: they must season the world and affect the world in a positive sense. But how can they do this and thereby become "the light of the world", so that everyone might say, "Come let us go up to the house of the Lord"?

A key way in which Christians' lives are transformed so that they might truly be salt and light in the world is by a serious life of prayer. The good old *Penny Catechism* defined prayer as "The raising of heart and mind to God", though Cardinal Basil Hume (Archbishop of Westminster, died in 1999) refined the definition as "The attempt to raise heart and mind to God", for even the attempt to pray is itself a prayer and we should not define prayer in terms of success or failure. Unless we pray we cannot hope to find God, or to recognise him in the world.

Liturgical prayer, and in particular, the Divine Office, is absolutely central to the monastic life. This is the official prayer of the Church and as such is completely objective, just like the sacraments. Provided that it is undertaken with the correct intention and the correct formulae it is efficacious: the world is sanctified and prayed for. As an objective means of prayer, it is unimportant how I feel as an individual at the prayer. People often say things like "I cannot pray", or "Prayer does nothing for me", or even "I won't pray today, because I don't feel like it". Prayer is dependent on God, not on us, and liturgical prayer reflects this. Our duty is to set aside some time each day, which we will give over to prayer. If we do so only when we feel like it, when it appeals, then we are only "fair weather friends" of our Creator and we can hardly expect to be the salt of the earth. It should also be of great help and comfort to us to remember that we are part of something rather greater when we pray. When we join in liturgical prayer in particular, we are joining a great host of people across the world, seeking to sanctify the day. As the hymn says, "The voice of prayer is never silent, nor dies the strain of praise away" (*The Day Thou Gavest*).

But liturgical prayer is not enough, since for most people this would mean simply turning up to a service on Sunday. We must take part in personal prayer, in all its different types, so not just the shopping list of intercessions, worthwhile though intercessory prayer is. Our personal prayer is another way of seeking to ascend the mountain of the Lord. There is a fine story of the Curé d'Ars, St John Mary Vianney, who noticed a tramp sitting in church each day, praying intently before the Blessed Sacrament. One day asked him what he was doing, and the reply was simple: "I look at God and God looks at me". This is the heart of what is known as contemplative prayer, a true gift,

for it is rarely easy “to wait in silence for the salvation of the Lord” (Lam. 3:26a). This type of prayer is like the relationship of a married couple. They know each other so well that they do not need constantly to speak to each other, they are happy just to be in each other’s presence.

It is through prayer, including contemplative prayer, that we can become the light of the world. We do not need to advertise ourselves as such, but the light of God will then shine through us. We will become saints, holy, and we will automatically act in such a way “that God may be glorified in everything” (Rule of St Benedict 57:9). The light of the Lord will shine in us and people will ask us for the reason for the hope we have, and may even say “Come, let us go up to the house of the Lord”, for as Christ says elsewhere in the Gospel, “By their fruits shall you know them”. But this is a long-term plan and will not come to fruition overnight. It may not even be in the lifetime of anyone here, but it will happen. We know this, because God is faithful, and so must we be. So, we should seek to be the salt of the earth, the light of the world and, to use the words of St Francis in a Franciscan house: “Preach the good news, and if you have to, use words” (St Francis of Assisi).