

Epiphany 5A
Isaiah 58:1-9a
1 Corinthians 2:1-12
Matthew 5:13-20

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

“You are the light of the world!” Jesus told his followers. He did not tell them they could be the light, or they should be the light – he just said that they were the light. And how they must have goggled at him, these poor fishermen and laborers, these servants and slaves who had sneaked time to hear a few words from the Teacher! If they were the light, then what were their leaders, the Scribes and the Pharisees, the Romans and the princes?

But Jesus told them: *“You are the light of the world.”*

Jesus, the wandering preacher and healer, had the gift of packing his radical message of love inside an apparently simple metaphor or phrase. In this case, he used two of the basic things necessary for life – salt and light. Three years ago in February 2014, when we were in Year A of our three-year lectionary cycle, I mused with you about Jesus calling his followers the “salt of the earth.” This time, let’s think about light.

The challenge for us, some two thousand years after Jesus spoke these words, is how to unpack his gospel truths!

In 1704 Sir Isaac Newton showed that white light contains all the colors of the rainbow. By directing a beam of apparently clear light through a prism, and looking at all the bands of different wavelengths that resulted, he showed that light contains all the colors we can see. And as time has passed, our scientists have made remarkable discoveries about color and what it can tell us.

Light plays an important role in the Bible, too. Remember the opening passages from the Book of Genesis, where God said “Let there be light?” It was the first step in the creation of the world. And it is remarkably echoed by the modern theory of the Big Bang, the enormous explosion of light energy that astrophysicists tell us began our Universe. Scientists use light to measure the size and movement of galaxies and stars as they seek to understand the nature of cosmic space.

When Jesus says to his followers – and by extension to us – “***You are the light of the world!***” He means exactly what he says – I checked the Greek translation, and it is indeed: You are the light of the world. Perhaps the next two sentences help us: “***A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all the house.***”

There is an amazing quality about light – the darker it gets, the more easily even a faint light is seen. Think about those dim nightlights that don't appear to be on during the day, and are enough to let you safely get up at 3 am.

So a city built on a hill can be seen for miles, because its light is a clear beacon. And a lamp, even a dim oil lamp of Jesus' time is bright enough to illuminate the house far beyond the immediate circle of the lampstand. So it is with any source of light – it will be seen.

Jesus wanted his disciples to understand what happens when you commit yourself to the Way of Love and become his follower. People will notice your light. In the passage previous to this one in Matthew's gospel, Jesus has just shared with his disciples the sayings we call the Beatitudes – sayings that describe who are the blessed. They are the ones whose light will shine through the darkness of their world: the meek, the poor in spirit, the merciful, those who hunger and thirst for justice, those who are pure in heart, the ones who are peacemakers.

Now there's an interesting aspect to this – he does not say, those who have certain nationalities, or beliefs, or skin color or gender. He does not identify the light-sources as having a particular social class or language or lineage. It is not even clear from Matthew's gospel that he is saying that his

disciples have these characteristics. Jesus is telling them where to look for the light and salt, so that they will recognize them when they see them.

Where shall we look for light in this troubled world of ours?

Isaiah warns in his prophecy not to look at the people who proclaim that they are doing God's will, but don't follow God's commandments. And don't look at the people who make a big show of their religious practices, but oppress their employees and workers and are quick to quarrel and fight.

Look instead says Isaiah, at those who loose the bonds of injustice, let the oppressed go free, who feed the hungry and house the homeless, and start with their own households. For their *"light shall break forth like the dawn."* We will know who they are because they light up our dark world.

Our scientists have developed a way of testing materials to determine their chemical content called *spectroscopy*. The word comes from the same root as *spectrum* or range of color, and *scope*, or vision. When different substances are burned, their resulting gases glow in different colors, thus revealing the mix of elements they contain.

Other techniques use the light that is reflected to decide their composition. We do this when we distinguish a living leaf from a dead one – if it reflects the green light, we know it is alive. Astronomers use these tools to determine the composition of various asteroids and planets, as well.

What if this is a bit like what Paul is talking about when he says: “The Spirit searches everything.” God’s Spirit, capable of parting the waters of Creation and making space for life, is also capable of knowing what is in human hearts. To extend the analogy, it is as though God’s Spirit can see the true blue souls of peacemakers, the green liveliness of those who hunger and thirst for justice, and the golden yellow in the souls of those who are pure of heart.

And here’s one last point to consider about that kind of spiritual light – like all clear light that cannot be hidden, it contains all the colors of the rainbow. To make God’s light complete, every color and shade is needed. Green must not say to yellow, let purple go first. Red can’t say to blue, we don’t need you, or the reverse. We are all in this together, if we are to be Jesus’ followers.

Perhaps today you might want to share the Peace with your neighbor before communion with Jesus’ words:

“You are the light of the world.”

Amen.