

Commentary on the Gospel for Sun, Jan 26th 2014

In the birth of Jesus, God brought light into a dark world. Several of our New Testament writers say this in different ways. John takes a cosmic point of view: the eternal Word, through whom all things were created, was “the light of the human race; the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:3-5). Luke quotes the risen Jesus commissioning Paul with these words: “I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness of what you have seen of me and what you will be shown. I shall deliver from this people and from the Gentiles to whom I send you, to open their eyes that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God . . .” (Acts 26:16-18). And Paul, in his letter to the Colossians, can summarize the conversion with which both he and they have been blessed with that same image of darkness enlightened. He reminds them that God “has made you fit to share in the inheritance of the holy ones in light. He delivered us from the power of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col 1:12-14). And in today’s gospel, Matthew quotes Isaiah to say the same thing as he introduces the public ministry of Jesus: “The people who sit in darkness have seen a great light, on those dwelling in a land overshadowed by death light has arisen” (Matt 4:16).

Shortly after Matthew’s introduction to Jesus’ public life, we hear Jesus addressing his followers with the same imagery, but now it is transferred from Jesus to the mission of those followers: “You are the light of the world a City set on a mountain cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and then put it under a bushel basket; it is set on a lampstand, where it gives light to all in the house. Just so, your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father” (5:14-16). And those “you’s” are plural, meaning that Jesus speaks these words to his followers as a community. Since this is the same speech in which Jesus says, “Take care not to perform righteous deeds in order that people may see them” (6:1), we might hear this as a contradiction to his mandate to be the light of the world. But that latter quotation refers to specifically religious practices—fasting, almsgiving, and prayer—warning his followers not to do those things for show. But Jesus’ earlier charge to be light for the world refers to the ordinary living of the Christian life—taking care of one another and reaching out lovingly to others beyond the community, realizing that these things will be a witness to the world of love for all that the heavenly Father’s animates in Christian community.

In this context, the reading from Paul’s second letter to the Christian community in Corinth gives us plenty to think about. We hear Paul scolding this otherwise vibrant community for their rivalries, factions based on each boasting about being mentored in the faith by a particular minister—Paul, or Apollos, or Peter—probably saying things like, “My catechist was more authoritative than yours!” Don’t we sometimes see similar divisions, even within our own faith communities, where some of us consider ourselves more “orthodox” or better informed than others because of our training, education, or sources of information? I hear Pope Francis saying, “Don’t be so self-preoccupied; live the gospel fully in all of your relationship—within the faith community and beyond it. Let your joy in the gospel be contagious, so that those who see it will recognize that this joy comes from the heavenly Father, not you. Along with John, Luke, Matthew, and Luke, let the people sing together, ‘This little light of mine,

I'm gonna let it shine!"

Dennis Hamm, S.J.