

[Readings: Isaiah 58:7-10; Psalm 112; 1 Cor. 2:1-5; Matt. 5:13-16]

One Christmas, about five years ago, my dear sister Kathy went on a special pilgrimage to Cleveland Ohio to the “A Christmas Story” Museum and Gift Shop to purchase my very own leg lamp, a feature of the movie “A Christmas Story” about little Ralphie who wants a bb gun rifle for Christmas. His dad entered a crossword puzzle contest and wins what is called “a major prize” – a lamp in the shape of a woman’s leg, complete with fishnet stocking and a tacky lamp with black fringe. The first click of the light switch turns on the big light bulb under the shade. A second click turns that light off and illuminates the leg. A third click illuminates both. I did put it up as part of my Christmas decorations the every year, and especially the last two years in memory of my dear sister. But it is not in one of the windows facing the traffic on Hoover Road! It is discreetly in a window on the side of the house to greet parishioners turning into the parking lot!

There is a similar lamp called the adobe lamp. Same concept. The first click turns on the light bulb surrounded by the lamp shade. The second click turns off that bulb but turns on a soft, little night light bulb hidden inside a little adobe house. The third click turns on both bulbs.

The word “pueblo” technically means a communal dwelling or even a whole Native American village. But it also refers to a particular native people, or any member of that group. It’s an intriguingly flexible word: a single building, a whole village, a tribe of people, or just one person.

I thought of how the word “Church” functions in a similar way, or in a “similar light!” I am Church. We are Church together. This building is a church. And the community in which we live and move and have our being is Church on a grand scale. Of course, there is another way in which this analogy is helpful. Consider the exchange of light from the greater light of the primary lamp to the humble glow of the “pueblo” house. That, too, is a movement familiar to the Church. Want to live in the light? Then do justice, says the Lord. Share your bread, shelter the homeless, and clothe the naked.

It's almost predictable how often people return from a simple work of this kind and declare with amazement, "I received so much more than I gave." That "so much more," we could say, is the promised light.

And among ourselves, we need to remove from our midst oppression, false accusation and malicious speech. That means no more bullying, no more gossip, no more judging one another without knowing all the facts. When we move into the world's darkness bringing help and hope, we bear the light with us. It's not ours exactly, and it's not us either. Divine justice harbors its own light, and when we surrender to its service, the light has a chance to rise in some of the darkest places around. When we find the courage to touch other lives, the glory of the Lord goes ahead of us, and the gloom can indeed become like midday.

This "glory of the Lord," understood as the *Shekinah* or hidden-yet-manifest presence of the Divine, always did function as a light in dark places. Remember the smoking brazier Abraham witnessed on the dark night of the first covenant, or the burning bush that appeared before Moses. Consider the pillar of fire that stayed with Israel during long desert nights, or the tongues of fire at Pentecost that lit the way for the newborn Church. When we travel the way of holiness, we won't lack for light.

In today's Gospel, Jesus calls us the light of the world. That's an amazing proposition, considering that we regard Him in the same way. He dares us to take that light and bathe the whole world with its brilliance. The best way to be the light of the world is to shine before others through our example. We are called to be the Christ-bearers, bringing our little pueblo light before us as a testimonial of the greater light of Christ that we have witnessed. If we bear no light in our coming, then we can gesture all we want in the darkness about our faith, and no one will believe us or even comprehend what we are talking about. The only way to reveal the light is to be the light. Christ has shared His light with us so that in our lives, however humble, the promise of that light speaks boldly against the darkness. May our light shine brightly, now and always. AMEN!