

Beginning last weekend and continuing through the weekend of March 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> the gospel selection for Mass will be from Jesus’ “Sermon on the Mount.” With the season of Lent beginning late this year we have the rare occurrence liturgically to read the entirety of Jesus’ sermon.

In today’s selection Jesus tells us that his disciples are to be the “salt of the earth” and the “light of the world.”

Salt, along with water, fire and iron, is a critical necessity for human life. Salt, as we know, is both a seasoning and a preserving agent for food. So valuable was salt that in some ancient cultures it functioned as currency. Salt was also used in liturgical functions. It was included with cereal and burnt offerings, blended with incense to keep the fragrant powder pure and sacred. Salt was used by the prophet Elisha to purify a polluted spring of water. In the pre-Vatican II rite of baptism of infants a bit of salt on the tongue of the child praying that the new life of grace received might remain incorrupt. This harkens back to its use in the ratifying of covenants in the Old Testament symbolizing their permanence.

Light, produced by fire, is a means of illumination. It has also been associated with learning. Think for a moment of something as mundane as a cartoon strip. When a character gets an idea, the dialog bubble drawn above their head usually shows an illuminated light bulb. Liturgically, lighted candles at one time served the utilitarian purpose of providing illumination so priest and people could carry out worship in dark spaces. While no longer necessary for such needs, the candles used at Mass are not just a means of creating ambience. They function as a symbolic reminder of Jesus the “Light of the world” and as a reminder of the flaming candle each of us received at baptism as we were missioned to carry the light of the gospel into the world.

The prophet Isaiah reminds us today that we are salt and light when we reach out and share the life of God with others in works of witness and justice. St. Paul testifies

to how he came to the Corinthians as salt and light. Each of us can, and must, do something with the divine grace we have been given. Each of us must be salt and light. Mike, a close friend of mine who died suddenly a month ago, was someone who was “salt and light.”

I was with Mike and his wife Kathy and some other friends twenty-five years ago at a social gathering when we received word that their nine year old son Luke had been accidentally shot and killed by their ten year old nephew as the two of them had been playing with what they thought was an unloaded rifle. I remember walking with Mike, Kathy and their other two children, Beth and Andy, through those dark days and the weeks and months that followed. At the time of Luke’s death Mike and Kathy had begun to be involved in the Teens Encounter Christ (TEC) weekend retreats for high school youth. Later, they also became involved in the Christian Experience (CEW) weekend retreats for adults in the Dubuque area and helped establish the program in their parish in East Dubuque. In later years both served their parish as extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion. Often they were called upon to share their story. They told of how faith sustained and carried them through the dark days of Luke’s death. They never blamed or harbored bitterness toward their nephew, his parents, life or God over their experience. On occasion I would call them and ask them to call or write parents to whom I was ministering at the sudden death of a child. Their story and example has helped countless people find hope and reconcile any number of “losses” and other life hurts. At Mike’s wake Kathy told me over a 1,000 people passed through the funeral home, many stopping to briefly tell her how Mike’s, and her, witness personally affected them. Mike was a plumber, an ordinary guy. Mike, and Kathy, were (and are) salt and light.

We are called to do the same.