

A couple of months ago a parishioner came up to me before mass and showed me a small, ceramic lamp he had bought during a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. It may or may not be ancient – he said it was – and certainly such lamps are common finds and available for purchase. It fits easily in your palm and looks like a small, red clay-gravy pitcher, or tiny teapot. There is the handle like a teacup, a small hole where you pour a little olive oil into the lamp's body, then a pour spout, along which lies the wick – a simple string with one end in the oil, while the other end is lit.

This was the common light bulb of the ancient world – and the kind of lamp Jesus is talking about in our Gospel. “You are the light of the world . . . Nor do they light a lamp and then put it under a bushel basket; it is set on a lamp stand, 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.”

One image, or analogy, I have of the spiritual life comes from this passage. We can think of ourselves as each being the wick of one of Jesus' lamps. As He says here in the Sermon on the Mount, we are meant to be lights for the world. How could that be? When Jesus says we are to "shine before others," think of the ways in which a holy person radiates grace to all who draw close. The grace ("light") comes forth from our actions and words and is experienced by others as the faith, hope, love that we can share with others.

The "oil," so to speak, that fuels this spiritual radiance, is God's grace we receive from Him via prayer, sacrament, acts of charity, etc. That is what fills our lamps – God's grace (the word simply means 'the interior life of the Trinity'). That is part of the reason for the 20 minutes of prayer, the daily or weekly Eucharist, the Bible study – to fill our lamps. As an old saying I picked up in the seminary goes, "Nemo dat quod non habet," (roughly – You can't give what you don't have). We're given God's grace, in part, so we can give it away

(shine) to others. And in between the “oil” of grace and the “light” of the faith, hope, love, there lies the wick. A wick is a humble object, but it is the means that allows light into the world. WE are meant to be Jesus’ wicks -- conduits by which He shines His light in the world.

There is a simple little song you may have learned at a Bible Camp, “This little light of mine, I’m going to let it shine.” It’s kind of corny, and it would be nice if I could use another pithy Latin phrase, but I admit this children’s’ song is more or less what Jesus is asking for here in this Gospel passage.

A modern saint, St. Elizabeth of the Trinity, a French Carmelite who died in 1906, famously described herself as a “Praise of Glory.” That sounds strange. What is it to be a Praise? St. Elizabeth thought of herself as a walking, talking embodiment of the praise God deserves from each of His creatures – that is, our lives are meant to continuous acts of praise of, and to, God. We’re to shine God’s grace on the world.

Practically speaking, how might that happen? We're going to be giving out a book for Lent – Practicing the Presence of God, by Brother Lawrence, another Carmelite. It's one of Pope Leo's favorites. In this short, classic book of Catholic spirituality, Br. Lawrence's whole point is for us to call to mind throughout the day that God is present beside us – and to hold a simple, on-going conversation in our hearts with Jesus as we go about our day-to-day activities. This conversation would include a frequent lifting up our minds to praise God's glory in whatever situation we confront. Br. Lawrence says this is hard at first, but once the habit of remembering God's presence is formed, one is radically changed.

We, the baptized, are each small lamps of God in a dark world. If we are practicing a prayer life we receive God's grace – the "oil" that can pass through the wick of the lamp – us (we're simply the wicks) – and illuminate the world with that grace of God. What if our daily spiritual life consisted in imaging ourselves as God's small

flames, little lamps or votive candles, whom He deliberately sends into those situations we find ourselves in? And we then ask over and over through the day, “Jesus how can I bring your faith, hope, and love to this person or group, here and now?”

The challenge is to remember to do it. It’s so easy to get caught up again in the busyness of the world and forget God is present right now. But when that happens, as it will, all we need do is peacefully start over again.

I have found that when I can remember to do this, it’s game changer. We are actively looking for ways to strengthen faith, give hope, and show love to others concretely, here and now. And it works. Our motivations change, ideas come into our heads. We speak new words of faith, hope, and love. God shines in us more brightly. “[Y]our light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father.” “This little light of mine, I’m going to let it shine.”