

Life Was Revealed

From John's First Epistle comes our theme for today: "Life was revealed". What life? Of course, he is talking about Jesus: God having come into the flesh. As one commentator puts it: "*the life revealed in the Incarnation and known in Jesus Christ*¹". But, in a broader sense, John is also talking about the "*nature of divine life*²" that was revealed in the Son.

Light, Fellowship and Joy

Now, why is it important for John to write a letter about this? We could think it is because it is a deep spiritual and theological insight – which it is! But that's not the reason he gives. Actually, he mentions two reasons:

1. "So that you also may have fellowship" (v. 3)
 - a) "with us" (John and the other disciples)
 - b) "with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ"
2. "So that our joy may be complete" (v. 4)

So... fellowship and joy!

Then, in the next verses, John associates life – the life that was revealed – to light: "God is light" (v. 5); "in Him there is no darkness at all" (v. 5); we must "walk in the light" (v. 7); "not walk in darkness" (v. 6).

And since God is light, walking in the light is walking with God – walking with Jesus, as we often put it; walking as a metaphor for the way we live our life.

And if we walk in the light, we have fellowship (v. 7). He's coming back to that idea of fellowship: fellowship with God (v. 3) and fellowship with one another (v. 3,7).

So John associates life to light, fellowship and joy.

This morning, I will focus on how life is revealed today – being guided by the sub-themes of life, fellowship and joy.

So how is life revealed today? And, more importantly, how do we participate in revealing life? Let's start with light...

Light

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says that we are the "*light of the world*" and that we should let our "*light shine before men*" (Matthew 5:14, 16)

I find it interesting that, in his Gospel, John said that *Jesus* is the light of the world (John 8:12, 9:5) and here, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says *we* are. Which is

1 John Painter, *1, 2 and 3 John*, Collegeville (MN), Liturgical Press, p. 137.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 311.

it? I take that as meaning that we should imitate Jesus in our lives and reflect Him, who He was/is “before men”: walking in the light, walking with Jesus, walking in His footsteps. Jesus is no longer physically here, and as someone once said, *we are now his hands and feet*. Jesus has no other hands or feet on earth than us.

I also find interesting what Jesus says about how we are to accomplish this: “*Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works*” (v. 6). So we are to be a light that people see, not necessarily a loud trumpet that people have to hear. I like the way Francis of Assisi puts it: “*In all circumstances, preach. If necessary, use words*”.

So, one way life is revealed today is by letting our light shine in today’s society, mainly in the form of good works.

Fellowship

One of the lectionary scriptures for today describes what happens after Pentecost. The first community of believers, numbering 3,000, has been formed, and this is what follows: “*Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common*” (Acts 4:32).

I won’t go into all the reasons why this is not necessarily the prescribed, mandatory way of life for Christian communities in 2018. For one thing, it was a different social, political and economic context – not the same as in Quebec and Canada today. We now have social security systems (though they have been under attack for the last couple of decades...).

But the point is this. The purpose of putting everything in common was this: so that it “*was distributed to each as any had need [and so] there was not a needy person among them*” (v. 34-35).

So, not putting everything in common for the sake of some political ideology, but to make sure everyone’s needs were taken care of.

You may have heard that quote attributed to Karl Marx: “*From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs*”. Each person contributes to the community to the best of his ability. But the distribution is based on each person’s *needs*, not on what they contributed to it (which may be much less, or much more).

I mention that quote because scholars trace its origin to Acts 4 (and also Acts 2:44-45). And what was the result of this? Note verse 42: “*And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship*”. Presumably because they didn’t have to worry about their basic needs being met.

So life is revealed today by making sure (to the best of our knowledge and ability) that everyone’s needs (not necessarily “wants”) are taken care of. That’s what part of fellowship is about. And that’s also a way to let our light shine.

Inside or Outside the Church?

However, having said this, a question arises: if we take care of everyone's needs *inside* the Church, how is that letting our light shine *outside* the Church?

After all, after saying that we should let our light shine, Jesus adds: “*No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket*” (Matthew 5:15a). And, using a different metaphor, he says: “*A city built on a hill cannot be hidden*” (Matthew 5:14b).

So, how do we let our light shine outside the Church? The possibilities are probably almost endless, but I will provide a few concrete examples as food for thought.

Bible, Church and Social Justice

A few years ago, I taught a course called “Bible, Church and Social Justice”. Most students were there because they cared about social justice but a couple of them were there mainly to collect the last three credits they needed to get their degree.

One of the questions we examined was whether the Church should get involved in social justice and to what extent. One of the students said that we should put the Church's financial resources into evangelization (by this, he meant saving souls, basically), and if there was any money left, *then* we could put it into good works for social justice.

Now, from listening to televangelists in the 1970s, my understanding is that there is *never* enough money for evangelization. So, there will *never* be any money left for social justice. How is that letting our light shine?

A related question, once one concedes we should budget (individually or collectively as a Church) at least *some* money for good works, is whether we should do this in a utilitarian way: like providing food or clothing to attract people to Church so we can try to save their soul.

For example, two of my friends once tried a sociological experiment. They dressed as homeless people and sat in front of a Church on a Sunday morning, begging for money (I hasten to add it was *not* a Mennonite church). They didn't get any money, but they did get a few dirty looks: obviously, they were disturbing the holy atmosphere of a typical Sunday morning Christian worship service. They were politely asked to leave, but they stayed there. Finally, the deacons came out and told them they would be given food – *provided* they stayed for worship and listened to the sermon – only then would they get the food.

That's what I mean by doing good works in a utilitarian way.

Contrast this with the experience of another one of my friends. He, his wife and their young daughter were living in an apartment block in Park-Extension: lots of immigrants – Hindus, Muslims, not many Christians. They organized a food-sharing system so that every day, one family would cook dinner for the whole block (or, at least, the families that agreed to participate). This resulted in lower

costs for everybody and less waste, since the purchasing and cooking was done in bulk. It also resulted in neighbours getting to know each other in a way that would not have been possible otherwise.

Because of this initiative, they came to know a family that was recently arrived in Montreal. Their children were not eligible for schooling because the parents were not recognized as legal immigrants. So my friend and his wife organized for the homeschooling of the children, until they could go to school (and not fall behind). Each day, a different person in the building would take the children for a few hours, to teach them what they would have learned in school that day (they had managed to get the official school textbooks and all).

This is how my friend came in contact with the Montreal representative for the organization “*No One Is Illegal*”³. She was an avowed atheist, and told him she was surprised that a Christian would do such things as he had done with the food-sharing and the homeschooling of “illegal” immigrant children⁴ – which is a sad commentary on how non-Christians view Christians in Montreal. A few weeks later, my friend got a phone call from her: her mother was seriously ill and... would he pray for her mother! Imagine: a lifelong, hardened atheist asking for prayers from a Christian.

My friend didn’t do any of these things for the purpose of converting people. He just did what he thought Jesus would have done in those circumstances: helping people – most of them non-Christians – just because they were human beings, created in the image of God, and, well... they needed help.

That’s what I mean by doing good works in a non-utilitarian way.

A final example, taken this time from the history of the Church. In the early days of Christianity, cities were sometimes affected by epidemics. The rich people fled the city to their countryside homes. And local authorities sometimes forced the evacuation of all the people not affected by the plague – and left the sick people in the city to die. But the Christians stayed behind to provide basic hygienic needs to their fellow Christians who were sick – which was oftentimes all that was needed. And they extended the same help to non-Christians. So they let their light shine by doing good works, by helping the sick. They didn’t care just for their own: they included non-Christians in their fellowship.

So light and fellowship... or should I say: extended fellowship.

Joy

Finally, and to conclude this already too long meditation: joy.

3 An advocacy group for “illegal” immigrants who are at risk of deportation.

4 He had also set up a system to provide furniture to recently arrived immigrants.

In Galatians, Paul includes “joy” as part of the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:23). And so Christians should always have joy.

As a Christian, the apostle John also had joy. Yet he writes about making his joy “complete”. And complete joy seems to proceed from light and fellowship:

- Walking in the light, letting our light shine. And this brings joy – to ourselves and to others.
- Fellowship with God and with others. And this brings joy – to ourselves and to others.