

The Fifth Sunday After the Epiphany – 2020

Kobe Bryant was a Christian. That may not mean too much to the people in the media, the sports-world, or the nation as a whole but it means something to me. The day he and his daughter died, they went to church to receive the sacrament. That too may not mean too much to the glitterati but it definitely means something to me. I am grateful that I'm not in the spotlight, at least not beyond our happy and humble congregation. I suspect that you too are grateful that you're not watched everywhere you go, with your every word recorded and analyzed, and if you hack off your relations, they don't go running to media with some story of what a wretch you are.

In the movie *The Help*, Aibileen Clark, the wonderful nanny, repeatedly gives Mae Mobley, the precocious toddler, a word of encouragement. "You is kind. You is smart. You is important." Her English leaves a little something to be desired, but the sentiment is priceless. Aibileen was sincere. She was instilling in that little girl a sense of identity, a positive identity, an identity that would help Mae Mobley see herself aright, to behave in a way that was in keeping with that positive identity, to grow strong in that identity, strong and courageous and composed. What a gift!

You are a Christian. That is your identity. It is certainly not a generic identity. There is color and contour and depth and music and emotion to your identity. Being a Christian is a marvelously multi-faceted reality. And it is not just for self – this identity of yours. Your identity is inherently for the benefit of others. Jesus calls you the light of the world. That means that you, personally, are a benefit to your family, your neighborhood, and your culture. Light... that is what you are; for the benefit of the world, the people around you, the folks you come in contact with. Your identity is a function of your Lord. Jesus does not keep a safe distance from sinners, from common men and women. He is the light of the world (John 8:12). God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God – He is light incarnate; He is truth and goodness and heaven and He is holy. You are the light of the world because you are connected to Him!

Do you believe that, just as a common neighbor, that Jesus was a blessing to those among whom He lived? Was He friendly, eager to help, supportive of those distressed, accenting the positive, directing his neighbors to God and His grace? Did He reach out and comfort those who hurt, congratulate those who were riding high, and help those in the midst of conflict to work through their problems? Now this may all seem rather mundane to you but it is real, it is every-day, and it is ongoing, which is to say, it is in front of you *now*. You are the light of the world because you are connected to Christ – He has seen to it. His Spirit lives within you, His death and resurrection animate your heart and mind, and you hearken to His voice in His holy Word. You are baptized. St. Paul puts your baptism this way. What I'm about to recite is a short baptismal passage that is easily memorized. Commit it to memory this week and reflect on the fact that Jesus calls you the light of the world. "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself up for me" (Galatians 2:20).

You are the light of the world. That is way more than "You is kind. You is smart. You is important." Way more. Christ shares His life with you and He wants you to know it. What you

possess is valuable. You are valuable. Again, St. Paul writes this: “God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (2 Corinthians 4:6). You, Christian, you are the light of the world. That is not religious emotionalism, it is not a catch phrase for the trendy believer, nor is it empty spiritual optimism – it is a theological reality, pertinent for every one of you, and something we should all internalize.

I didn’t know Kobe Bryant, but I know every one of you. Someone really saw the light of Christ in Kobe. I see it in you... and I am blessed. Who, humanly speaking, has had the biggest effect on me? My wife. I profit from Christ in her. When I met her, she was the brightest light I had ever seen. You are no different. You’re not on the tele but you interact with people; people who hurt, who struggle, who are overwhelmed by darkness. Sometimes it is obvious what other folks are going through. Sometimes you may not notice. So, if you are going around hiding your light, if you are lighting a lamp and putting it under a basket, then you are not fulfilling your calling, you are literally warring against your new nature, your Christian identity. Here’s the bad news. You do do this. I do this. It is self-centered, it is small, and it is sin. We hide our light – in all sorts of ways and for all sorts of reasons. To fit in, to attempt to go unnoticed, to gain someone’s approval, to avoid conflict, or what is worse – because you enjoy the darkness.

Father, forgive them. That is the verbal light that came cascading out of the crucified Son of God. In Him was life, and that life was the light of men. On Good Friday, Christ gave up His life. Father, forgive them. That reality envelops you. The light of that grace is morning glow in which you rise and it is the evening beam of love that settles you in your bed. Perpetually wrapped in Easter, you are a child of the light, a child of the resurrection. That is your identity. You are now, and ever shall be, the light of the world. Think of what this light is, what defines it, what are its colors and contours and music. The Lord Christ laid aside His divine prerogatives and took up the form of a servant. That is the light in you. Jesus loved His enemies and did good to those who hated Him. That is the light in you. Your Savior took up His cross, without complaint, and gladly gave what the Father asked of Him. That is the light in you. The light of Christ elevates men, elevates women above self-service, above petty grudges, above worldly indulgence. Light gives, light goes out, light changes the place where it is found.

This church preaches Christ and Him crucified, that is why we say that the light of Christ shines in this place. The Lord has located His light for us to be enlightened. It is found in His Word. You hearken to His voice and you are drawn to the light. Search your heart; you know how very good the light is and how sacred you have become by being connected to Christ. You know how blessed you are by virtue of His light and to whatever extent you distance yourself from that light you diminish yourself and to whatever extent you lavish yourself in light, you are enlarged, enhanced. Light of Light has located Himself in the bread and wine of this eucharistic meal. His body and blood are the divine gifts of love and sacrifice and forgiveness and when you eat it, when you drink it you are bright with His grace. Having received His gifts, you go out into your station in life and you are the light of the world. Others see it, others see your good deeds, your Christ-like manner, and they praise your Father in heaven. That is a wonder! That is beautiful and it enriches us all. You are kind. You are smart. You are important. Why is all that true? It is all true because you are the light of the world. To God alone be the glory.