

“You are the Salt of the Earth! You are the Light of the World!”

Manifesting Jesus Christ to the World

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

By the time you read this we will have just passed from Epiphany into Lent, however, the “manifestation” or pointing toward Jesus Christ as the Messiah and Son of God (as celebrated in Epiphany) is still very much on my heart and mind. Throughout the Season of Epiphany we heard of the various ways God the Father pointed toward Jesus as the Son of God and long awaited Messiah.

First, God used a special star in the heavens as well as the prophecies of old, to lead the Wise Men or Magi from the East across hundreds of miles from their homelands to the small town of Bethlehem where they found Jesus with His mother Mary. We are told that upon finding Him, they worshiped Him and gave gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, manifesting or pointing toward Jesus’ royal kingship, divinity, and pending sacrificial death as the Lamb of God.

We then celebrated Jesus’ baptism by John the Baptist (the one appointed by God to prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah, and spoken of by the Prophet Isaiah). When Jesus came up from the baptismal waters in the River Jordan, Heaven opened and the Spirit of God descended upon Him in the form of a dove, and God the Father spoke, *“This is My Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased.”* (Matthew 3:17). God spoke similarly when Jesus took Peter and James and John up on the mountain and was transfigured before their eyes, revealing His divine nature. A cloud overshadowed them and God the Father spoke, *“This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased; listen to Him.”* (Mark 9:7). That was the ultimate manifestation of Jesus as the Son of God.

After His baptism, Jesus began manifesting or pointing to Himself as the Messiah and Son of God. He called the Disciples to come follow Him and then began teaching them about Himself and performed many miracles as a sign of who He is and why He came into the world. In the Gospel of Matthew we read, *“Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.”* (Matthew 4:23). Later in John’s Gospel, Jesus is challenged by the Jewish authorities and they demand that He tell them plainly if He is the Messiah. Jesus responds by saying, *“I did tell you, but you do not believe. The works I do in My Father’s name testify about Me...I and the Father are one...even though you do not believe Me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in Me, and I in the Father.”* (John 10:25,30,38). All of this has been recorded in Holy Scripture so that we and future generations may come to know and believe in Jesus just as his early followers and disciples did.

In the Gospel passage assigned for the Fifth Sunday after Epiphany, the focus shifts from Jesus to the disciples (to you and me). Jesus said, *“You are the salt of the earth...You are the*

light of the world.” (Matthew 5:13-14). In making these statements, the Lord is saying there is a role for us to play in His manifestation as the Son of God, the Messiah and Savior of the world.

In order to get a sense of what Jesus means when He says, “*You are the salt of the earth,*” it is important to think about the various qualities or characteristics of salt. As a quick aside, during my high school years, I lived in Grand Saline, Texas. The town was named Grand Saline meaning “great salt” because it sits on one of the largest salt deposits in the world. The Morton Salt Company headquartered in Grand Saline, built a salt palace several years ago for the annual salt festival. Unfortunately they have to keep rebuilding it because it keeps melting. Getting back to the qualities of salt, one of its main uses is as a seasoning. It is used to season food in order to help enhance or bring out its flavor. It is also used as a preservative, helping to preserve unrefrigerated meat so that it won’t spoil. It can be used as a cleansing or purifying agent. As such, salt is often sprinkled in the “holy water” we use in Church. As we know up north, it is also used to help melt snow and ice.

So what does all of this have to do with the manifestation of Jesus Christ? As we think about the qualities of salt just mentioned, the Lord is calling us as “the salt of the earth,” to use our saltiness to help enhance the flavor of our teaching and personal conversations with others about Jesus, so that fellow Christians may be strengthened in their faith and non-Christians may come to know and believe in Him as Lord and Savior. He is calling us as members of the Body of Christ and “salt of the earth” to help fight the decay in the world around us and to offer ourselves to God to be used as a purifying and healing agent in the brokenness we encounter. He is calling us to live our lives in such a way that the love of Christ flows from us to help melt the hardened hearts that act as barriers to people’s ability to believe and trust in Christ as Lord and Savior. It is only in and through the grace of God that we can do any of this.

When Jesus said, “*You are the salt of the earth,*” He went on to say, “*But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.*” (Matthew 5:13) The Lord is making it clear in this statement that He expects us to use our “saltiness” to help manifest or point others to Him. If we don’t, what good are we? As we enter into Lent, we might want to contemplate on the level of our saltiness? What are we doing to help point others toward Jesus? In the Diocese of Albany we believe the Lord is calling us to be “Disciples making Disciples.” Our “saltiness” is a key ingredient in caring out that mission.

As we go about as the “salt of the earth” and “Disciples making Disciples,” it’s important to remember one of the other aspects of salt. When using salt, it is important to use the right amount. While a little bit of salt can help enhance the flavor of our food, too much salt can make it uneatable. As Christians we are called to share our faith, NOT beat people up over the head with our faith. There is a fine line between just enough and too much. May the Lord give each of us the grace to know the difference. WE want to help bring people to Christ, not drive them away.

Not only did Jesus say “*You are the salt of the earth,*” but He also said, “*You are the light of the world.*” He first pointed to Himself saying, “*I am the light of the world. Whoever follows Me*

will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” (John 8:12) He is the true light. As Christians, we are called to be a reflection of His light shining forth in us and through us, pointing others not to us, but to Him. Just as the light of the moon is actually a reflection of the sun’s light, as Christians and the “light of the world,” we are to live our lives in such a way that reflects the light of Christ. Light guides, reveals, comforts, warms, illumines, and points the way. Light overcomes darkness. Even the smallest flame shines out in a darkened room.

I am reminded of the Great Easter Vigil and the lighting of the new fire. The service begins in darkness. A single spark ignites the fire which lights the Pascal Candle, signifying the “Light of Christ.” As the Pascal Candle passes down the aisle, individual candles on both sides of the isle are lit from the Pascal Candle, sharing the “Light of Christ” with the surrounding candles until all the candles in the room are lit, filling the room with the “Light of Christ.” As the “light of the world,” Jesus is calling us to share His light with one another until the whole world is aglow in His light and glory.

Is the Light of Christ shining forth in your life drawing and pointing others to Christ, or has it been hidden under a basket? Jesus said, a lamp is intended to be put on a lamp stand, not hidden away, in order that the whole room may be lit, driving away the darkness. Tragically many Christians today have hidden their lamp away in fear of being persecuted for their faith, or made fun of, or rejected by family and friends. The Lord calls us not to live in fear, but to trust and follow Him, sharing His light with others so that they may be set free from the darkness of sin and live in the light Christ Jesus. May Christ give each of us the grace to let His light shine forth boldly in our lives in such a way that He is manifested and glorified.

While there is much that each of us can do individually in response to the Lord’s call to be the “salt of the earth” and the “light of the world,” this year we have the opportunity to come together as parish families and a diocesan family through the Alpha Ministry in an effort to manifest Christ to the world around us in a mighty and powerful way helping believers and non-believers alike to come to know and experience the love and forgiveness of Jesus Christ in truly life transforming ways.

This year’s Parish Leadership Conference will focus on reintroducing the Alpha, Ministry to all the parishes of the Diocese of Albany in an effort to help us better share the Good News of Jesus Christ with friends and loved ones as well as the stranger on the street. Early in Bishop Herzog’s Episcopate, Alpha came to the Diocese of Albany, where it was well received by many, helping to ignite a new sense of joy and excitement in sharing the Gospel and growing many of our churches, both physically and spiritually. Over the years for a variety of reasons it kind of faded out. We believe it is time to bring it back on a large scale.

“Alpha is an opportunity to explore life and the Christian faith in a friendly, open and informal environment. It is a 10 week course run in churches, coffee shops, prisons, and homes worldwide. Essentially, Alpha is a safe place to explore life’s biggest questions.” Its chief components include food, talk and discussion.

The three-fold goal of this year’s Parish Leadership Conference is for all those attending to:

- 1) Leave with an exciting and vibrant understanding and experience of bring people to Christ

through Alpha 2020; 2) Leave refreshed by the Holy Spirit – empowered and inspired and ready for ministry; 3) Leave with tools and a plan to begin the process of running Alpha in your church, workplace, neighborhood, or where ever the Lord might lead you. Plans are being made and will be revealed at the PLC for a coordinated diocesan wide Alpha Program beginning in September 2020. The new and revised Alpha Ministry provides a wonderful and exciting opportunity for individuals, parishes, and the wider diocese to truly be the “salt of the earth” and the “light of the world,” manifesting Jesus Christ as the Son of God and the Lord and Savior of the world. I pray you will join me and other brothers and sisters in Christ from around the Diocese for this year’s Parish Leadership Conference. The dates and locations will be posted separately.

Faithfully Your Brother in Christ,

+Bill

Bishop of Albany