

Homily for 5 (A)

“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill-top cannot be hidden.”

✠In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

There is a very interesting painting by Rembrandt from 1642 called “The Militia Company of Captain Frans Banning Cocq and of Lieutenant Willem van Ruytenburgh” or, more simply, “the Night Watch.” You can certainly understand why anyone would prefer the second title, apart from the immediate family of Captain Cocq and Lieutenant Ruytenburgh and their descendants, as it is easy to remember. The trouble with the second title is that it was imposed on the painting at the end of the eighteenth century, over a hundred years after the work was completed. The painting, depicting a nocturnal military assembly, was, in fact, originally a daytime scene. The varnish used by the painter had so darkened with time that day had turned to night, and all that stands out are the light-filled figures of the two central characters, the officers, the woman behind them and the faces of those standing about.

The wonderful use of light in the Dutch tradition has kept this masterpiece alive. The light shines through the darkness of the aged varnish. The metaphorical possibilities of this canvas are practically endless, and you are probably bracing yourselves for a salvo of light in the darkness talk. I shall not disappoint you. True light comes through. It is like with some very, very elderly people of great and good character – the light is always there, the spark of human beauty is never extinguished despite all the ravages of age, infirmity and illness. In fact, in the really saintly, in the really lovely, a process seems to take place like the aging of fine wine. The extremes of personality become matured into a coherent and mellow resolution which surpasses the virtues of the component characteristics which preceded it. The reverse is, sadly, true of those who are far from saintly. Nasty people seem to get nastier with age, self-pitying, self-obsessed and vindictive, they lapse into an unfortunate ragout of sinful impulses for which age or illness becomes an excuse.

Well, I know which group I hope to aspire to. Our lives are called to be very like the Rembrandt canvas. We are called to be works of light which shine through the darkness of the conditions which may surround us. Life has a lot of luck in it. Circumstances play a part in who we are and in how we are. But we do have the power to reach into ourselves for the light that we have been given. We are able find what is of virtue and value in ourselves and play to that.

We may have great natural gifts personally. Do we use them?

We may have been given good friends, a loving family, good neighbours. Do we cherish them?

We may have been greatly hurt, or harmed or disabled by circumstances beyond our control. Do we reach into our humanity and find the light of God? The light which enables to forgive, forget and start again?

We may think that we have made a complete mess of our lives and the lives of those around us. Do we stay locked in misery, or do we look for the light?

We may be fabulously fortunate, materially, intellectually, artistically or spiritually. Do we share our gifts with others, or are we miserly with what we might be able to share with others.

I know it sounds as if I think that the key to existential difficulties lies in an intellectual decision to overcome them, but that is not really what I mean. Our lives are made up of thousands and thousands of small decisions, which themselves lead to bigger decisions. We need to walk towards the light in every one of them, we need to engage our wills and our consciences, informed by prayer, into the task of turning ourselves toward the things of God.

It is doubtful that anyone will ever try to remove the varnish from Rembrandt's painting, because, well, it is Rembrandt's varnish. The things which prevent folk from seeing our daylight, well, that is another matter. As Jesus' teaching makes clear, we can put our lights under a bushel, we can let our salt become tasteless, or, we can turn to God and be salt to the earth and light to the world. And all that flows from the power of small decisions to change lives. As Isaiah says:

*If you do away with the yoke, the clenched fist, the wicked word,
58:10 if you give your bread to the hungry, and relief to the oppressed, your
light will rise in the darkness, and your shadows become like noon.*