

As many of you know, before I entered the Seminary, I planned on becoming a history professor. My doctorate was in Colonial American history. And it's with that background that I always read this passage from Matthew, "You are the light of the world. A city set on a mountain cannot be hidden . . . your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father." To a student of Colonial American history this passage immediately brings to mind the sermon preached by John Winthrop, the Founder of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, entitled, "A City Set on a Hill" (using the King James translation). The sermon was preached on March 21, 1630 to the English colonists before boarding the ship *Arbella* at Southampton.

In my homily today I want to use the historical context of this sermon as an illustration of one of Jesus' points in the Gospel. To understand Winthrop's words, it's important to remember that the English colonists who came to New England, did not come to found the United States. The colonists of New England, Winthrop's people among

them, the people we term The Puritans, were more interested in changing England than they were in breaking away from it.

England in the early 17th century was marked by deep religious and political divisions. The “Puritans” (a name that was used as an insult – like the term “fundamentalists” today) were Calvinist Protestants opposed to the less reformed church model of the English Kings James I and Charles I. They were denied freedom to practice their form of Protestantism freely within the Church of England – and hence departed for Plymouth and Massachusetts.

What does this have to do with Jesus’ words? Winthrop and his fellow-colonists left everything behind and risked their lives in America in order to set up an alternative society – a society that would live according to what they saw as the true path of Christ, something they saw as impossible at home. But as such a role model, they would, they hoped, influence the people and government back in England.

Winthrop, in his “City on a Hill” sermon, told his congregation that they had entered into a covenant with God for this work of founding a New England – just as the Israelites had done under Moses in their journey to the Holy Land. He said, “The Lord will surely break out in wrath” against them if they failed to fulfill the covenant by putting “their interests above the interests of others and of the colony.” Winthrop said, “The way to avoid this shipwreck is to follow the course of Micah, to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God.”

If, on the other hand, the colonists did form such a society “we shall find that the God of Israel is among us . . . He shall make us a praise and glory . . . For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us.”

On the face of it that idea seems absurd. Here were a few hundred simple Englishmen, thousands of miles from the homeland – and the eyes of all people would be on them? But there was truth to these words. The colonies of this “New” England did nurture and give

birth to ideas and social possibilities that fed into and strengthened the opposition to royal extremism in the years leading up to the English Civil War in 1642. A few people living a devout, radical Christian life left their mark on history: in the Old World and the New.

One of the points Jesus is making in our Gospel from The Sermon on the Mount is that His followers are meant to be role models for changing the world – lights for the world. And His Disciples are to do that by living lives transformed by their faith – the justice, mercy and humility the Prophet Micah calls for.

This idea has had lasting impact on American history. The New England colonies were not the richest or most powerful. The planters of Virginia and the merchants of Philadelphia did not spend as much effort trying to influence English politics and society. They were trying to get rich and get ahead as most people always have – as most Americans do today. But this idea of a “people with a mission for the world” has stuck in the minds and hearts of many Americans: that, somehow, we’re

supposed to be different. Politicians have often used the phrase “city on a hill” to tap into this strain of Americans’ self-understanding.

But what about Jesus’ teaching and His Church? As Catholic Christians Jesus is telling us we really are supposed to be roles models of faith and charity for the world. This is one more reason the sex abuse scandal has been so harmful. We haven’t exactly been a light to the nations. We can’t aim at winning the world’s approval. That will never happen if we’re living the Gospel well. But we are called to live our lives in such a way as to get the world’s attention – as the Puritans hoped to impact what they saw as a worldly England.

In an increasingly secularized world, we need to form our own colonies of faith, that is, small communities, groups of holy friends, determined to live Catholicism out well and fully in a secular world – so as to be a source of hope and light for those who don’t yet know Christ. Some people might label us – as they did the Puritans. That term suggests people saw those Calvinists as self-righteous – purer than

others. No doubt there were arrogant and sinful people among them. And we Catholics would disagree with some of their theology. But at least people did notice them and their faith. They couldn't help but see that the "Puritans" were trying to live life in a different way.

What about our parish, friends, families? Do the ways we live our faith have any impact on our neighbors? We may think, on the one hand, that our secular environment makes just holding onto the faith difficult enough. How can we go on the cultural offensive, so to speak? But these days the maintenance of our faith will increasingly only be possible if it's so strong and distinctive that it does stand out in the eyes of the world. With that thought, and Jesus' words today in mind, let us each ask ourselves, "Is my life a light to anyone?" And then bring it up with our Catholic friends. "Are we a city on a hill?" What would it take to become one?