At this time of the year, many of us become more sensitive than usual to sunlight as well as to its absence. I, for one, to take a simple example, dislike driving in the dark. That is especially the case in the downtown where jaywalking seems to be take for granted.

Light, whether it be natural or artificial, helps us to see the world around us. It enables us to avoid the everyday dangers that life in the city entails.

Light has not only a practical but also an aesthetic dimension. It is used in the creation of art and the illumination of buildings and monuments. The arc that the sun traces in the course of a day can bring breath-taking visions of sparkling leaves and of playful shadows.

For many people, light has a religious quality about it. It suggests something spiritual. People light candles or use flashlights to mark a serious accident or a tragic death, a victory or triumph of one kind or another.

In some traditions, the sun takes on a divine aura. It is celebrated as a source of life and warmth and beauty. For some, the sun is so powerful and radiant that they attribute to it a divine character. St. Francis of Assisi loved nature. His Canticle of the Sun reflects this: “Praised be you, Lord, with all your creatures,” it begins, “especially Sir Brother Sun, Who is the day and through whom you give us light; And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendor and bears a likeness of you most High One.”

Francis is captivated by the sun and all that it means for human life. It is not divine but points to the divine. It reflects something of the beauty and the life-giving power of its creator.

Light as a physical reality and as a spiritual symbol appears in the first and the last chapters of the Bible. The Book of Genesis begins with the story of creation, the first stage of which is the creation of light: “In the beginning,” we are told, “darkness covered the face of the deep … And God said, let there be light and there was light. And God saw that the light was good and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light day and the darkness night.”

The biblical account of creation comes to a climax and an end in the final chapter of the book of Revelation. “There will be no more night,” it says, “no more need of light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light.”

As much as the language of light and darkness evokes our everyday experience, it also has a symbolic and spiritual significance.

Today’s psalm speaks for the Old Testament when it declares, “The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom should I fear?” In today’s first reading, a passage which, in the Christian liturgy, evokes the birth of Jesus, Isaiah declares, “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in the land of deep darkness, on them light has shone. In today’s Gospel, Mathew applies the OT imagery to Jesus.

The famous prayer of Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, ends with the image of light. “By the tender mercy of our God,” he says, “the dawn from on high will break upon us to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

Light plays an important role in the Gospel and the first Letter of John. On one occasion, John reports Jesus as saying, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.”

In the gospels, light refers primarily to Jesus. It is in the light of his teaching and example that we are able to discern the path before us and to walk on it without stumbling or falling or losing our way.

We sometimes speak of the light of the mind as being analogous to the light of faith. The Catholic tradition has emphasized the positive relationship that should exist between the two. Both come from God; both are sources of light and knowledge and understanding.

If Jesus is the light of the world, then those who believe in him and follow his path are and are called to be light to others. Our kindness and patience, our willingness to listen to others, the peace that we radiate, all these and more raise questions for people.

Jesus offers an answer to many such questions in the Sermon on the Mount when he says to those who would be his disciples, “You are the light of the world … No one after lighting a lamp puts it under a bushel basket, but on the lampstand and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way,” he adds, “let your light shine on others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

One of the more moving expressions of this comes at the Easter Vigil. The service starts in darkness, a darkness that is gradually overcome as the priest lights the paschal candle and processes up the aisle, chanting three times, “Light of Christ.” As the flame from the paschal candle is shared with those who are present, the church becomes radiant with light. Jesus is our light, the light of life.