

3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, 22 January 2023

Scriptures: Isaiah 8:23—9:3; 1 Cor.1:10-13,17; Matthew 4:12-23

Homily: Fr. Ken

Reflecting on the scripture readings for this Sunday, the passage from Isaiah seems to arrive about a month late. This time last month people sang a Christmas carol about people in darkness being caught up in a great light. Hearing that prophesy during our liturgy now reminds us that the light shone in the darkness that vainly tried to overcome it. Today we remember both the light and the cost and the joys of sharing it.

Isaiah addressed people forced from their homeland, people whose shared suffering created shared hopelessness, who were figuratively or literally blinded to the possibility of a better future.

Matthew's description of Jesus' first foray into public ministry makes important points in just a few verses. First of all, citing Isaiah, it reminds the readers that Jesus' work of salvation is as deeply rooted as God's involvement with humanity.

There is an unexpected key to understanding these Scripture texts in Paul's Letter to the Corinthians. Throughout the Letter, Paul will express his exasperation with this community that he himself founded. Here we learn about the conflicts among them, based not on activities, but on their adherence to different ideologies. Proving that the tendency to argue over ideas rather than put Christianity into action is as old as the Gospel itself, the Corinthians were divided into competing sides that Paul characterized as being with Apollos, Peter, or himself, with only some claiming that their primary allegiance was to Christ. In the midst of that heretical fracas, Paul even rejoiced that he had

avoided establishing rituals. Paul actually placed little emphasis on how the community used words and symbols to express their faith. His priority was on living: how the people treated one another and how their community gave witness to the world of a new way of living—a way of life that clearly proclaimed the message of the cross.

In the Gospel, Matthew recounts the call of the first disciples. Rather than act like a rabbi who would allow followers to choose him, Jesus used the practice of people who wanted to settle a dispute or promote their own cause: He went out and called others to join with him in making his case. While most who did that were only interested in settling some sort of argument, Jesus' call was far more demanding. His invitation to them to become "fishers of men" called for a total transformation. His followers would no longer be merchants gaining something for themselves; they would offer their services for the life of any and all the others who might get caught up in Jesus' cause, the reign of God that was being fulfilled in the proclamation he put into action through his healing activity.

When we hear these scripture readings during the first month of the new year, we are invited to remember our own baptismal call and ask ourselves what tendencies promote or hinder our living it out. We begin by remembering that we are the recipients of ancient traditions that have brought us into contact with God's great love for humanity. This is not our doing, but God's.

We also remember that we have faith not for our honor and glory, or even our own salvation, but to spread it as a light—a light offered especially to those who are experiencing darkness. Listening to the words of the prophet Isaiah moves us to ask who are the ones currently displaced, overburdened or blind with despair.

When we have identified our sisters and brothers most in need of the light of God's love, when we listen to their cry, then we have

begun to hear the call of Jesus. That, of course, is not yet the beginning of real discipleship. Discipleship, the spreading of Christ's light, only happens when we are willing to leave behind every political position that hinders or prevents us from acting on behalf of people in need. We may find ourselves with unexpected colleagues, we may even need to avoid discussion of certain debated topics. But in doing so, we will learn the unimportance of our opinions in the light of the magnitude of the basic fundamental human needs of our sisters and brothers.

We may not be able to leave behind our occupations, the nets and the boats necessary to sustain daily life, but we can accept the grace of being freed from the encumbrance of our viewpoints, the ideologies and prejudices when they prevent us from joining together with everyone else called to proclaim the kingdom of God by actions, and then, if necessary, by words.

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