

Commentary on Sunday Scripture – Year A

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

First reading:

(Isaiah 9.1-4)

Light in the Land of Darkness

This prophecy of Isaiah is chosen as the first reading because, in the gospel reading, Matthew sees its fulfilment in the healing activity of Jesus in Galilee, the region once allotted to the two northern tribes of Zebulun and Naphthali. Not long before the total collapse of the Northern Kingdom of Israel they were invaded and devastated by the mighty power of Assyria. They are therefore given as the archetype of the ruined territory that will be restored to light, joy and rich harvest when God comes to save his people.

In fact, Galilee has rich soil and wide plains. The Jewish historian at the time of Jesus is lyrical about the abundance and variety of fruit grown there. The prophecy of restoration is expressed in the past tense ('have seen a great light') to emphasize its certainty: it is so sure that it can be described as if it had already happened, a tense known as 'the prophetic past'.

The passage of Isaiah goes on, after our reading, to speak of the child to be born, who will achieve this transformation. He will be 'Wonder Counsellor, Prince of Peace'. Such was the background of hope which gave their full meaning to Jesus' deeds as he brought divine healing and restoration in Galilee.

Question:

What is the most important element that would restore our country to God's service?

Second reading:

(1 Corinthians 1.10-13, 17-18)

A Divided Community

It is hardly surprising that the Christians at Corinth were a divided community; there were so many different levels of employment and wealth, financiers, dockers, tent makers, administrators and many others in that town with its double port, its booming trade, its biennial games and supporting trades.

Paul shows us that there were also cliques claiming different personal loyalties. Some claimed to be Paul's own followers. Apollos was a Jew from Alexandria and a notable orator; perhaps he had the intellectual following. Cephas is the Aramaic name for Peter; his following may have been Christians sprung from Judaism who wanted to keep their Jewish practices in food, circumcision and Sabbath observance. Paul will have none of this party politics, one group hurling slogans at another. They would not even come together as a genuine community at the Eucharist. Paul had baptized people to be not his own followers but followers of Christ. Later in the letter, he will explain that Christians must form a single organic body, all working together in harmony, each with a special task and special gifts, but all contributing to the wellbeing of the whole. This is his basic vision of the Christian body, all living with the one life of Christ.

Question:

Are there any echoes of such disunity in your community?

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Gospel:

(Matthew 4.12-23)

The Call of the First Disciples

This is the beginning of Jesus' ministry.

Matthew first introduces us to Galilee, characteristically quoting the scriptures to show that they are being fulfilled, and in what way. Galilee is called 'Galilee of the gentiles' only in this passage, and it was not a particularly notable feature of Galilee. Archaeology shows that Jewish observance was strong in the region. Contemporary literature shows that there was a lively tradition of prayerful charismatic rabbis with a warm devotion to the Lord.

Jesus begins his ministry by proclaiming the imminence of the Kingdom of God, which will be the subject of all his activity. Then he begins to form the new Israel by calling his team together. T

he Christian imagination tends to combine this scene with the scene with the Baptist in the Jordan Valley in the gospel of John, which gives at least Peter and Andrew some knowledge of Jesus. But today's narrative must be heard on its own, and the staggering factor is that this is the first time at any rate the sons of Zebedee have set eyes on Jesus. As he passes by, he calls them, and such is the electrifying power of his charismatic personality that they simply drop everything and follow this total stranger - immediately, as the evangelist stresses each time.

Question:

Do I ever follow Jesus' call immediately and unconditionally?
