

Little lights radiating God's Son-Light

3rd Sunday of the Year A: January 26, 2020

Readings: Isa 8:23–9:3; 1 Cor 1:10-13,17; Mt 4:12-23

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light” (Isa 9:2)

Theme: The first reading predicts the rise of the Messiah from very humble beginnings; while the gospel passage suggests that this prediction is fulfilled not only in Jesus of Nazareth but in his choice of simple fishermen fishing in the Sea of Galilee to carry forward his light.

Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. The first reading foretells the joy and radiance that the future Messiah will bring into the lives of a people who are sad and wallowing in darkness. This passage dates around the 8th century BC when Galilee, in the north-eastern corner of Palestine, was conquered and crushed by the Assyrians. The Assyrians suppressed the Israelite religion, destroyed their culture and made it tough for them to retain their identity and worship the God of their ancestors. Amidst this darkness, Isaiah speaks of hope for the descendants of two tribes: Zebulun and Naphtali. These two were sons of Jacob (renamed Israel) and thus brothers of Joseph (see Gen 46:14,24) who settled in the area of Galilee. The phrase “God brought into contempt” the land of Zebulun and Naphtali indicates that they were reduced to a weak minority after the Assyrian invasion, incurring the effects of their own evil, pride and idolatry as they had wandered away from God. But, these tribes and peoples “who walked in darkness have seen a great light”. Here is future reference to the messianic age when the Messiah will transform the woes of the Galileans into joy. Two images of future joy are provided: (a) of a farmer who reaps a rich harvest; and, (b) of conquering soldiers who divide the loot of the conquered people among themselves.
2. Since the Gospel according to Matthew is one that sees in Jesus the fulfillment of all the First Testament prophecies, Galilee is given special prominence. Being by the sea, Galilee was a route through which many traders and invaders passed. In the “latter time” (messianic age), “God will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.” From here will come the eagerly-awaited Messiah who will turn darkness into light, sorrow into joy. The darkness of idolatry and slavery will be transformed into true worship and freedom. The instruments of oppression of the Assyrians—the yoke, staff, rod of the oppressors—will be broken and those of the two small tribes will experience victory as once did Gideon when he defeated the Midianites (see Judges 7:16-25). Hence, there is reference to “the day of Midian”: a slice of history that was known to the Israelites.
3. The Gospel tells us that Jesus moves from Nazareth to Capernaum on the seaside of Galilee, a thickly populated area, thereby making a definitive and symbolic break with his former, quiet and so-called ‘hidden life’ life with his parents in Nazareth to his new public life and mission in bringing the Gospel to the world. In this we see the fulfillment of Prophet Isaiah’s prophecy of the first reading, meaning: “the people who sit in darkness [in the micro sense the Galileans; in the macro sense the whole world] have seen a great light [Jesus, the Christ]. While Nazareth is in the territory of Zebulun, Capernaum is in that of Naphtali on the “way of the sea”. Capernaum, on the northern shore of Lake Gennesaret, was home to

the two pairs of fishermen-brothers: Simon/Peter and Andrew, and, James and John. These brothers could have already been distant disciples of John the Baptist who had either heard John's testimony about Jesus or even witnessed Jesus' baptism by the Jordan. Be that as it may, Jesus calls them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people" (v.19). The Master's call seems too alluring to resist. "*Immediately* they left the boat and their father and followed him." Family, fortune, fishing and their future were thrown to the winds in order to follow Jesus. They would, eventually, be little lights of God's Son's Light.

Linking the Second Reading to the Theme: Coming soon after the '*Octave for Christian Unity*' (January 18 to 25), the second reading is significant. Paul was preaching 'good news' only to be given 'bad news' that "there were serious differences" among neo-Christians. The context is Corinth, the church founded on Paul's second missionary journey (between 50-52 A.D.). Paul's Corinth ministry (Acts 18:1-18) shows that he founded a 'composite church' of Jews, Greeks, traders, tillers, rich and poor amidst tribulations including trial before Gallio's Tribunal. However, 'differences' crop up, which are not doctrinal but denominational. Paul complains: "What I mean are all these slogans that you have, like: 'I am for Paul,' 'I am for Apollos,' 'I am for Cephas'" (1 Cor 1:12). Thereafter, he fires feuding factions, "Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized in the name of Paul?" He stresses two things: (a) that they are one in the crucified-risen Christ, and (b) baptism binds them into a believing Body. Paul clarifies, "Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach Good News, and not with eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be purged of power" (v.17). Isn't the light of the gospel dimmed when we fragment Christ's Body on the basis of rites, castes and class?

The Responsorial Psalm: with its response, "The Lord is my light and my help," once again stresses the theme that our Light is Christ. Thus, "whom shall I fear?" The focus of disciples from Peter and Andrew, to Paul and Apollos has always been Christ, the Light, who dispels all fears.

Three Contextual Concerns:

The Constitutional Concern: Since we celebrate 'Republic Day' and the Constitution is under threat, there is need to stress our composite character as a secular, socialist, democratic and free nation where everyone has equal rights and must fight new forms of internal captivity.

The Denominational Concern: Indian Christians often ask, "Which church do you belong to?" – Lieven's? Xavier's? Thomas's? Latin? Syro-Malabar/Malankara? Or, CSI? Baptist? Maybe, Dalit? Tribal? Are we not very much like the Corinthians whom Paul critiqued?

The Minority Concern: Zebulun and Naphtali, James and John, Capernaum and Galilee—all these have one thing in common: littleness, insignificance, weakness. It is amidst these humble and weak beginnings that God's strength is made manifest, and God's Son-Light shines.

In Lighter Vein: [paraphrasing Tony D'Mello, SJ] ... When Jesus returned to heaven, the angels were overjoyed to have him back and asked him: "Did you complete the mission entrusted to you by your Abba, Father?" Jesus replied, "No, but I've chosen some people to continue the work I began." Excited, the angels said: "We suppose you've picked doctors, lawyers, philosophers and intellectuals?" Jesus showed them the list: "Peter, Andrew, James and John: fishermen; Simon: zealot; Matthew: tax-collector, etc." Disbelieving, the angels laughed loudly. Wouldn't they laugh even louder when they see your name and mine on that same list of those he has called and chosen?
