

## Homily for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

January 22, 2023

St. Bavo Parish

Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.

*First Reading: Isaiah 8:23-9:3 (The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.)*

*Responsory: Psalm 27 (The Lord is my light and my salvation.)*

*Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 1:10-13, 17 (Paul pleads for unity among the Christian community.)*

*Gospel: Matthew 4:12-23 (Jesus begins his ministry in Galilee.)*

Starting today, and continuing throughout the remaining weeks of Ordinary Time, we will hear *Matthew's account* of Jesus' public ministry. At this early stage, Jesus is just beginning to preach and heal and attract disciples. As we proceed on this long journey with our Lord and his disciples, Matthew will take great pains to show us that virtually *everything* that Jesus does is in fulfillment of Scripture. Time and time again, Matthew will tell us what Jesus did on a particular occasion and then pause to cite a prophecy from the Old Testament which has been fulfilled by Jesus' actions. In this way, Matthew not only tells the story of Jesus, but also provides a running commentary to accompany the narrative.

Today, for instance, Matthew notes that Jesus begins his public ministry in Galilee, the northernmost part of Israel, and he cites the same prophecy from Isaiah that we heard in the first reading. In order to understand the significance of this connection, we need to understand the context of Isaiah's prophecy.

Isaiah uttered these words from the relative safety of Jerusalem, in the Southern Kingdom of Judah, as his Jewish brothers and sisters in the north were being ravaged by the powerful Assyrian army. These invaders came from the north, attacking Galilee first, then proceeding southward to Samaria, and then into the land of Judea, where they tried and failed to conquer the holy city of Jerusalem. Later, the Babylonians would follow the same path, from north to south, and they would conquer the whole of Israel. Isaiah saw this calamity unfolding and imagined it as a dark cloud slowly enveloping the Jewish people. The northernmost tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali were the first to be overshadowed by death, and all the rest eventually followed. However, Isaiah foresaw that a new leader of the Jewish nation would one day reverse this tragedy and dispel the darkness and gloom that hung over his people. The people who walked in darkness would see a great light; upon those who dwelt in a land of gloom, a light would shine. And, the liberation of the Jewish people would begin *in the north*, where the darkness first descended upon them. The question was, when would this happen, and who would be the great king who could bring about the promised salvation? For Matthew, the clear answer is *Jesus, the Christ!*

There were many reasons for Jesus to begin his ministry in Galilee. The most practical and obvious reason was that he grew up there. He probably had spent quite a bit of time in Capernaum and the other cities on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. After all, he was raised in the hill country only a few miles away. Another good reason to begin there was that Galilee, *unlike Judea*, had a mixed population of Jews and Gentiles. They had lived together peacefully

for generations in this region. Remember Matthew's story about the Magi coming to meet the Christ Child. The whole point of that story was that Jesus' salvation would reach beyond the Jewish people to include Gentiles, as well. If that was Jesus' mission, then Galilee was the ideal place to start.

So, Jesus clearly had good, practical reasons for beginning his ministry in Galilee. But, Matthew sees a deeper significance to this choice. Jesus was fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy, bringing light to those in darkness and hope to those dwelling in a land of gloom. As Isaiah predicted, he was freeing the Jewish people from their enslavement of past centuries, beginning in the north, with the region formerly occupied by the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali, the land called "Galilee of the Gentiles." However, the freedom that Jesus brought far exceeded Isaiah's expectations. This was not merely freedom from oppression by a foreign power, but freedom from the ancient curse of *sin and death*. Isaiah's great hope was only that the promised King of Israel would restore what had been lost, making his countrymen God's people once again. Jesus went much further, making all those who believe in him, whether Jew or Gentile, *children of God* and heirs to his eternal Kingdom.

While Matthew finds great meaning in the *location* where Jesus begins his public ministry, the *urgency* with which he sets out is just as important. At first glance, it may seem that Jesus is simply echoing the cry of John the Baptist, calling people to repentance, but his message actually is quite different. John was inviting people to repent and be baptized in order to prepare themselves for the coming of the Messiah. Jesus, however, is saying, "Repent, for *the kingdom of heaven is at hand*." There's no time left to prepare for the coming of the Lord. The kingdom has arrived, because *the King has arrived*. He is in your midst *right now*, calling you to follow him.

Matthew conveys the urgency of that message by the way he describes the calling of the first disciples. It's very likely that all of the Twelve Apostles began to follow Jesus after hearing him preach and witnessing his miraculous healings. But, as Matthew tells the story, Jesus just walks right up to these two sets of brothers on the seashore and says, "Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men." Immediately, they abandon their nets, their boats, their livelihoods, their families... *everything*, and follow Jesus from that day forward. Whether or not that's how it really happened, readers of the Gospel definitely get the message that when Jesus calls, we need to answer *immediately*, not at some later time, when we feel ready and sufficiently motivated. The call to follow Jesus is not just a friendly invitation, but a *summons* that demands a prompt response.

Sadly, many Christians today do not feel that sense of urgency. Sure, we know that Jesus calls us to repent, to reform our lives, to embrace his cross, and to follow him. But, what's the rush? The light of Christ entered the world nearly 2,000 years ago and, by all accounts, it *still* has not overcome *all* of the darkness in the world. So, why should we be in such a hurry to cast out all the darkness from our own lives? Many people tell themselves that it's good enough just to live a decent, moral life for now. A serious pursuit of holiness can wait until later. But, later never comes. For too many of us, Christianity becomes more like the cultural context in which we live, as opposed to a faith that makes urgent demands on us and calls us to take action. That's unfortunate, because the kingdom of heaven *is* at hand. Jesus continues to call disciples to follow him, and he demands that we respond *urgently* and *wholeheartedly*.