

January 26, 2014 THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

On the Ordinary Sundays of this year, Cycle A, the gospels are from St. Matthew's account of the life of Jesus Christ, Son of David, Son of Abraham. After his temptation in the desert, Jesus goes to the Jordan to be baptized by John. Today we heard that Jesus leaves the Jordan area after the imprisonment of John and travels to the northwestern territory of Galilee where he grew up.

Galilee is where the land assigned by Joshua to the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali, descendants of sons of Jacob, border on pagan lands. Isaiah described them in his time as a place where people were walking in darkness and gloom, upon whom a light has shone bringing them great joy. In the verses that follow that light turns out to be his announcement of the birth of a royal son, a Prince of Peace, whose dominion, he prophesied, would be vast, sustained by judgment and justice, forever peaceful. No earthly king could fulfill such a role perfectly. It had to wait for the coming of the Son of God, God of God, Light from Light, true God from true God. He came into the world so that the glory he has from before the world began could shine on it, drawing people from the realm of darkness into his wonderful light. His is that abiding light that no darkness can overcome.

Back to Galilee. It is there that Jesus goes public with his mission. He starts with John's proclamation, "Repent, the kingdom of God is at hand." There he chose his first disciples, the pairs of brothers, Peter and Andrew, James and John, fisherman. "Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men. At once they left their nets and followed him." It may not have happened as abruptly as that. Yet the more they heard and saw how he taught in the synagogues and cured every disease and illness of the people, the more they must have been drawn to leave their families and their fishing, to follow him wherever he went, do whatever he asked of them.

We know their story. They did not always understand his teachings, his claims about where he came from and the way he would accomplish his mission by his predictions of his passion. Yet they witnessed his power over the forces of nature, over demons and illnesses, even over death itself. At his command a storm becomes calm. "Who is this that the wind and the sea obey him?" He says to a paralytic "your sins are forgiven." But only God can forgive sin." He says to demons possessing a man, "come out of him" and the man is restored to normal life. He claims to know God intimately, to be sent by him to be Savior of the world. One of his most challenging claims that turned some away was "if you do not eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you." "This sort of talk is hard to endure. How can anyone take it seriously?"

Some thought this carpenter's son was a charlatan or self-deluded maniac. Can anything good come from Galilee? He was a threat to the handed down traditions. He did not observe the law of the Sabbath rest, he associated with outcasts, touched diseased people without regard to ritual cleanliness. Fanatics always draw a few followers they supposed. To be his disciple one had to be willing to be a fool for Christ. Paul reminds us that the wisdom of God is foolishness to the worldly wise, especially the reality of the cross and Jesus crucified. God's ways are certainly not our ways, especially as God asks the Son to take on our human nature and endure that terrible passion and death.

The preaching of a suffering Messiah and his resurrection from the dead into glory is foolishness to the gentiles and a stumbling block to the Jews. To those who believe they are life-giving truths. They light up the darkness of our minds as we try to come to grips with the brokenness of the world we live in. Why does someone go shoot six year olds in their school? Why do members of Muslim sects keep killing one another? Why do priests and brothers, uncles and coaches abuse the youngsters in their charge? Why does greed block any sense of compassion for the poor, or neglect to provide safety in buildings that collapse and kill a thousand women and children? The list goes on and on.

We are two thousand years and more from Isaiah and Jesus' time. What can we take away today from pondering on the Word? The verses from the opening hymn speak of the light of truth that radiates from the hallowed pages of scripture. The church received these scriptures as a gift and she still lifts up its light to shine on the world. The author concludes the hymn with a verse praying that the Savior make the Church itself a lamp to the nations, a light to guide wandering pilgrims on their path until they meet God face to face.

'The Church' can remain an abstraction until we identify with it as members of the body of Christ. He said to his apostles "You are the light of the world, the salt of the earth." Well, we can only shine a healing, freeing light on others when that light is a reflection of the light on the face of Jesus that Paul speaks of. The psalms and the prayers of the church often ask that God shed the light of his face on us. God has already done that by giving us the Beloved Son as our Savior. So it is right to sing, "the Lord is my light and my salvation." He is the one who said, "he who sees me see the Father."

Just as the face of Moses shone with the glory of God whom he met face to face on the mountain, so those who acknowledge Jesus as Son of God and their Lord can sing: "This little light of mine, I am going to let it shine. Won't hid it under a bushel, I am going to let it shine; won't let Satan put it out, I am going to let it shine; everywhere I go, I am going to let it shine." So in spite of the dark forces and gloom in communities and nations, in individuals, that we read and hear about every day, let's believe that all together it will never extinguish the light of Jesus that has come into our very world. So "take courage, be stouthearted and trust in the Lord." To him with the Father and the Spirit be honor, glory, praise and obedience now and forever. AMEN.

