

This Sunday's Readings – the 3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time – Today's readings present further proof that Jesus was the promised Messiah.

The first reading is taken from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah (1st Isaiah). This should be a familiar reading to all of us as it is the first reading at the Christmas midnight Mass. Here we hear some new names, the lands of Zebulun and Naphtali. These lands were part of the Northern Kingdom of Israel and were the first to be destroyed when the Assyrians attacked in 733 BC. The Northern Kingdom itself would be destroyed shortly thereafter by the Assyrians. Just as God always redeemed His chosen people, the Israelites, so He also redeemed Zebulun and Naphtali. The "light" that Isaiah speaks of is the light of salvation, the Messiah. Darkness will be dispelled and the land will be flooded with light. Reginald H. Fuller in his *Preaching the Lectionary: The Word of God for the Church Today* adds this comment – "This passage will be taken up in the gospel of the day, where Matthew introduces it as a formula quotation to mark the beginning of the Galilean ministry. This shows how the same passage is capable of different applications. Read on Christmas night, it relates to the nativity of Christ; it was then that light dawned in the darkness. Read now, it refers to the beginning of Jesus' ministry. It is with his coming to Galilee and the launching of his proclamation that the light begins to shine. Yet, as we have already remarked, the nativity and the ministry cannot really be separated because both are aspects of the single Christ-event, the coming of light into the darkness of the world".

The fulfillment of that prophecy is in today's gospel reading from Matthew. This particular reading is divided into three parts. The first part is the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. Upon hearing of John's arrest, Jesus moves to Galilee, the land of the Gentiles. As Matthew states – "He left Nazareth and went to live in Capernaum by the sea, in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali". Jesus brings the light of salvation to that region. He then quotes the passage from Isaiah that was part of today's first reading. Reginald H. Fuller in his *Preaching the Lectionary: The Word of God for the Church Today* comments on why Jesus began His ministry in Galilee – "Jesus proclaimed the coming of the kingdom; he called disciples and worked miracles of healing. All of this is placed under the rubric of the formula quotation from the ninth chapter of Isaiah (see the first reading). By means of this quotation, Matthew, who, despite some exclusivistic sayings such as 10:5, is not himself an exclusivist, underlines the universality of the gospel: it begins, not in Judean territory, but in Galilee of the Gentiles, and is therefore intended for all". The second part is the calling of the first disciples, Peter, Andrew, James and John. Note that there is absolutely no hesitation on the part of these men. They literally drop everything and follow Jesus. Fr. Roger Karban in his 1999 syndicated column adds this comment on the calling of the disciples – "Only those who have reformed their lives — totally changed their value systems — will be able to perceive the power of God around and within them. Matthew shows what it means to "reform your life" by vividly describing the first step in changing one's values. As Jesus walks along the shore, He suddenly tells Simon and Andrew, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers for people." Their response is just as sudden: "Immediately they left their nets and followed Him." Jesus repeats the call for the Zebedee brothers, who also leave their boat, nets and father, and quickly follow Him. Jesus asks the four to make a 180-degree

psychological turn. They're to give up everything and everyone that gives them security — anything that would keep them from really living — to reject the job and family ties which are important in their lives, and follow Jesus. Only after their heart, mind and senses are purged by the freedom which accompanies discipleship, will they be able to experience God's reign flourishing around them". The third section simply summarizes Jesus early ministry in Galilee. However, it goes deeper than that. The Israelites knew how they would recognize the Messiah. He would bring good news, freedom from sin, and healing. That is exactly what Jesus was doing, as Matthew states – "teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and curing every disease and illness among the people". The evidence speaks for itself. Jesus was the promised Messiah.

John J. Pilch in his *The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle A* comments on interrelationships in today's Gospel – "The gospel for this Sunday proposes three topics for our consideration: the Baptizer, Jesus' ministry, and Jesus' disciples.

JOHN THE BAPTIZER

John is in prison; he will shortly be put to death. Matthew, Mark, and Luke make it clear that Jesus does not begin his own ministry until the Baptizer has completed his. In John's Gospel, Jesus begins his ministry before the Baptizer's imprisonment. All the Gospels indicate that the Baptizer had a successful and effective ministry in his own right. During Jesus' ministry, people often confused Jesus with or identified him as the Baptizer (Matt 1:13-14). One plausible explanation for this confusion, proposed by contemporary scholars, is this. Moved to conversion by John's preaching, Jesus became his disciple. When John was imprisoned, Jesus ventured out on his own and gathered disciples (Matt 4:18-22) but continued to baptize and broaden his ministry (Matt 11:2-6). Soon he began to experience the ability to cast out demons and realized he had a distinctive ministry of his own (Matt 12:22-28). With this, Jesus stopped baptizing and came into his own.

JESUS' MINISTRY

After John's imprisonment, Jesus moves from Nazareth, his tiny hometown, to Capernaum, a larger crossroads town by the Sea of Galilee. He continues preaching John's message: "Repent, for the reign of heaven has approached" (Matt 4:17). Matthew encapsulates Jesus' ministry in a summary statement (v. 23): Jesus was teaching in the synagogues; preaching the good news, and healing. In Jesus' day the synagogue was a gathering place, like a modern community center, where males could meet on every day of the week to study or pray. Here Jesus read and listened to Torah, disputed and argued with others, but did not attend Sabbath services, for there were none at that time. For the ordinary first-century Jewish believer the Sabbath was not a day of worship; it was simply a day of rest. As for his healing program, Jesus is clearly a "folk" healer and not a "professional" In contrast to the latter, Jesus attempts to heal people. He doesn't just talk about healing.

THE FIRST DISCIPLES

Jesus' act of calling disciples is a common event in the Middle East. Usually, a person with a grievance invites people to join him in resolving the grievance. We don't know Jesus' grievance, but the disciples certainly did This in part explains why they dropped

everything to follow him. In unified groups there is strength. Moreover, this is the dry season. Farmers simply wait for the harvest. Fishing partners can leave the fishing to others for the time being. Now is the time to be out and about, to be seen and heard, to pursue group interests. Such group orientation or connectedness permeates this reading as it does the entire Bible. The lives of the Baptizer, the disciples, and healed clients are entirely intertwined with Jesus. Jesus' group-oriented culture lived by second nature what people like Samuel Gompers and Saul Alinsky would later have to teach to modern American individualists: Organize! Build your network! It's the only way you can win".

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