

Homily of Third Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A, 2023

Isaiah 8:3-9:3; Psalm 27:1, 4, 13-14; 1 Corinthians 1:10-13, 17; Matthew 4:12-23

Zebulun and Naphtali were among the twelve tribes of Israel that settled in the region of Galilee. They were among the territories invaded and conquered by the Assyrians in 721 BC. The invaders who were pagans occupied most part of Zebulun and Naphtali and integrated with the local people. The invaders practiced paganism, and so became the dominant religion. A few Jews continued to worship the true God. Yet, it was in this Galilean region that Jesus came from, in this region, he spent most part of his public life, and from there, he chose eleven of his apostles. Scholars identify Judas Iscariot to have come from Kerieth, south of Jerusalem. Iscariot in Hebrew means “the man from Kerieth”.

The history and the dominant pagan religion of Zebulun and Naphtali were the reasons Isaiah depicted the towns as “The people who walked in darkness” and “those who dwelt in a land of gloom.” The coming of Jesus would be “a great light.” Jesus was, also, addressing the sin of idolatry among his own people when he began his preaching with, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 4:17).

Today’s Psalm prays, “The Lord is my light and my salvation ... The Lord is my refuge ... I believe that I shall see the bounty of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord with courage; be stouthearted, and wait for the Lord.”

We stand on the prophecies of Isaiah and the words of the psalmist and pray: Whatever situation of darkness and gloom we are in, may Jesus be our great light. Amen. May he be our refuge and salvation. Amen. May his presence cause anguish to take wing, and may his presence dispel every darkness. Amen. May we see many great lights this year. Amen.

Isaiah depicted Zebulun and Naphtali as those “who walked in darkness” and “those who dwelt in a land of gloom” because they did not worship the true God. They worshipped pagan gods. If Isaiah were to prophesy about the men and women of our generation, he might use those same words or even harsher ones. The paganism of the men and women of our generation is not necessarily the worship of pagan gods. It is the worship of worldly things. The men and women of our generation worship material things, politics, business, economy, sports, science and technology, social activities, jobs, and so on. St. Paul, rightly, describes the world’s paganism in the following words, “They exchanged the truth of God for a lie and revered and worshiped the creature rather than the creator ...” (Romans 1:21-25).

In the second reading, we see that the Christian Corinthians were torn apart by divisions and rivalries. They were in different opposing camps: Paul’s camp, Apollos’s camp, Cephas’ camp, and Christ’s camp. The divisions and rivalries we see in our society, our country, and our world are the worst kinds of paganism. All the hate, violence, war, bloodshed, destruction, darkness, and gloom are caused, mostly, by divisions and rivalries.

If Jesus were to appear physically to us, he would not preach anything different from his words to Zebulun and Naphtali. He would warn us to repent from our kinds of paganism.

In today’s Gospel reading, the first four of Jesus’ disciples were fishermen: Peter, Andrew, James, and John. Why did Jesus not call, at least, his first disciples from learned men or from men of reputable professions or from the influential political class of his time? Rather, he called fishermen who were among the nobodies at that time. Jesus wants to teach us something: God can call and use anyone; child, adult, rich, poor, learned, unlearned, male, female for his work. No one should underrate anyone or underrate oneself. Our God is a God of surprises.

It is, also, symbolic that Jesus called fishermen as his first disciples. There are a lot to learn from fishermen. Traditional fishing is a painstaking job only embraced by strong and hardworking people. Fishermen cast their nets and wait patiently. They persevere by casting their nets repeatedly. At the end of their fishing, they spend time sorting out good fish from trash picked up by the nets. Fishermen are courageous people. While many people are resting and sleeping at night, fishermen are in the waters fishing, many times under very bad weather conditions. They are not deterred by darkness, storms, tide, and dangerous water creatures. They take many risks. Serious fishermen fish in faraway deep waters. Let us pray to have these qualities of good fishermen in order to become good and effective disciples of Jesus and fishers of souls. Amen.

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