

Third Sunday of the Year January 22, 2017

Readings: Isaiah 8:23-9:3, 1 Corinthians 1:10-13, 17, Matthew 4:12-23

The readings of today tell us about the Christian vision and mission and are intended to stir us into action. The vision is seen in the proclamation of the kingdom of God to all people and the mission of every person is to proclaim the word of God to all. The Gospel of today tells us that the spread of Christ's kingdom depends as much upon us today as it did upon the Apostles during the time of Christ. The Gospel passage tells us that Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in the synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom. The Kingdom of God is the divine rule in the hearts of people. For his mission and task of proclamation Jesus invites an intimate band of people to be his disciples who would share his vision and mission and also become his witnesses in the world. In the first reading prophet Isaiah says that in Galilee of the nations, the people will see a great light. The light of faith will guide them to a bright future. The people who heard the prophecy in those days perceived it to mean that the ideal Davidic king would come to Galilee, opening a new era of peace and justice. In the second reading Paul points to Christ crucified as the embodiment of the divine wisdom and love. He warns the Corinthians against divisions in the Christian family and tells them that Christ's self-giving should shame them as they hold on to petty quarrels among them. Paul asks the Corinthians to overcome all divisions existing in their community.

The First Reading of today tells us that the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness, on them great light have shined. Here prophet Isaiah reminds them that God's light is always being offered to them a people who had suffered exile, oppression, fear and shame. He tells them that the people and their kings have turned down the invitation to come to true faith. Because they did not rely on God for security, the kingdom is destined to weaken and fall. Due to their spiritual weakness their land will be vulnerable to the invasions coming down from the north. But prophet Isaiah sees a future restoration initiated by the ideal king called Immanuel in an earlier oracle. The rule of Immanuel will make them wiser. Isaiah showed them that God through this new prince would bring them out of the darkness of Assyrian oppression into a time of light and joy. The prophet held out hope for a future restoration of the people who walked in darkness. The light of faith will guide them to the peace and prosperity they had always longed for. Isaiah compares their changed fortunes to the joy that comes in the abundance of a harvest or a victory in the war. They will

experience the kind of security associated with the glorious days of Israel in the past as they overcame their enemies.

Today's Second Reading from the First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians gives an insight that walking in the Light means to be united in Christ. He was writing to a community suffering with numerous factions and divisions. Each faction had picked its own hero instead of directing everything to Christ. In his letter Paul counsels them not to participate in factions within the church and between the churches. He appeals to the Corinthians to be in agreement with each other, that there must be no divisions among them. He tells them that in a faith community where Christ is present, there should be perfect harmony among the believers because of their fellowship and unity is steadfast with Christ. To make his point clear he addresses them warmly as brothers and sisters. During his time the Christians in Corinth were divided into factions and identified themselves with various community leaders that they belonged to Paul, or Apollo or Peter and some said they are for Christ. Paul made it clear to them and warned them that such divisions are extremely harmful. There can be only one person, the one who suffered, died and rose for all, the One in whose name all of them have been baptized, Jesus, who is the embodiment of divine wisdom. Paul tells them that Christ has never been divided. Paul or Peter or anyone else was not crucified for them. They in fact were not baptized in the name of Paul but were baptized in the name of Jesus, in the Most Holy Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Hence all bickering among them is deplorable.

Today's Gospel Reading tells us about the beginning of the ministry of Jesus. The Evangelist tells us that after John the Baptist had been imprisoned by Herod Antipas, and as spoken by the prophets, Jesus withdrew "to Galilee" and began His own proclamation. The motive for Jesus making this move seems to be the arrest of John the Baptist. While no details are given about the arrest of John, it looks as if Jesus is continuing the work started by him, his own mission of God's Kingdom. He preaches in Galilee and works in Capernaum which presents him as the light of nations as told by Isaiah but more precisely he begins on the western shore of the sea that was occupied by many small but prosperous cities and towns. This provided Jesus with the opportunity of ministering to a large number of people within a reasonable walking distance. Galilee was known as a rebellious region where even Jews were noted for their non-observance of the Law. Jesus begins his ministry in such a challenging place with the special chosen message and his preaching is summed up in one simple sentence: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near; it is close at hand." This basic message of Jesus is similar to that of

John the Baptist which he preached at the River Jordan. It is centered round the coming of the Kingdom of heaven. It is presumed that John the Baptist may have been influenced by the Essenes, a scholarly religious group of the Jewish Community, who felt that the coming of the kingdom would be soon and therefore early preparations must be undertaken to receive the kingdom. John uses this message in his preaching and speaks of the need of preparing for that Kingdom.

The preaching of the Good News of Jesus begins with the word, Repent. His invitation to repent is to enter into a special relationship with God in response to his call. For 'repent' usually means to be sorry for, to regret some wrong actions we have done in the past. Jesus is asking for much more than that. It is a call, not to wipe out the past, which is really not possible for any human person, but for a change of direction from now on and enter into a new future. The Greek word, rendered by many translations as equivalent to 'repent', is metanoia. This word implies a radical change of heart, change in one's thinking, total transformation. It also means looking at life in a completely new way, making what is sometimes called a 'paradigm shift'. This new way of seeing life is spelt out through the whole of the Christian Testament. It is only when we begin to make this radical change that we begin to become part of that Kingdom that we begin effectively to come under the influence of God's power in our lives. We begin to see things the way God sees them and our behaviour changes accordingly. The call is not just to be sorry for past sins and not to commit them anymore. But it goes much beyond this namely, to have a complete change of heart, show hatred towards sin and to have a deep involvement in doing God's work. That work involves reaching out to others, working with them to end poverty and destitution, bring an end to hunger and joblessness, to communal and religious hatred, to rampant greed, ambition and shameless consumerism.

The Good news that Jesus preaches is that people have to repent and change themselves as the kingdom of God is near. It is the good news of hope, peace, promise, truth and salvation that is contained in the kingdom. Jesus comes to his people as the herald or the messenger of good news. His message of the kingdom has certainty and assurance; it has total authority and power because it comes from the source which is God himself. The Scriptures indicate that the kingdom of God existed at the foundation of the world. It is the authority of God over everything that he created for John tells us that everything was created in and through Jesus. The mission of Jesus now is to re-establish this divine kingdom. There is the immediacy and the urgency in his proclamation as he says it is here and now. The listener has to respond to it immediately without delay. At the same time Jesus

emphatically tells us that he is the good news and we have the obligation to listen to him. Already at his Baptism the Father had made it clear that he was his beloved son and we ought to listen to him. Now Jesus himself preaches this kingdom for all and invites them to respond to him. To be in the kingdom, then, is not to be in a particular place, either in this life or the next. Rather it is to be living one's life, wherever we are, under the loving power of God. It is to be in a relationship of loving submission to one's God and Lord and to be in an environment where values like truth, love, compassion, justice, freedom, community, and peace prevail.

As Jesus began his public ministry his first act was to gather some disciples or co-workers who would share his work and his mission. Jesus recruited Simon, who is called Peter, his brother Andrew, James and John, the sons of Zebedee. When Jesus called them their response was immediate. They left everything, their fishing nets, their parents and family and followed Jesus to be Disciples of Christ. The story of the calling of the first disciples showed their immediate and unconditional response to the summons of Jesus. The initiative for the call comes from Jesus but their response was total. Even though they had no previous knowledge of Jesus, they dropped what they were doing, left all their possessions and their dear ones to be with Jesus. This calling his first disciples indicates the beginning of the time of the church. On the surface level this may not make any sense to an outsider. However, it emphasizes that there was something almost indefinable about the person of Jesus that drew these first followers like a very strong magnet. They left everything, put their total trust in Jesus, leaving behind their means of livelihood and not knowing where all this would lead. Jesus on his part had already taken this step in leaving Nazareth, his family and his livelihood as a carpenter for the sake of his mission. These chosen people now share the ministry in which Jesus was engaged and is summarized as teaching, preaching and healing those who were sick in the context of the kingdom. The Evangelist tells us that from then on, Jesus travelled throughout Galilee, teaching in the synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. His mission was universal. It is the preaching and the healing work that reveals the efficaciousness of the salvation that began in Jesus.

Today's readings are intended to stir us into action. The Gospel tells us that the spread of Christ's kingdom depends on us today as it was with the Apostles during the time of Jesus. Paul's letter to the Corinthians counsels us today not to participate in the factions within our church and between the churches. Prophet Isaiah reminds us that God's light is always being offered to us as it was to a people who had suffered exile, oppression, fear and shame. We who practice our

religion should walk as those faithful people of old walked, allowing ones whole being to become flooded with joyous light. Light acquires transcendental quality, penetrating the soul, opening the heart and making our life open to the many who seek the truth.

A poor illiterate man wanted to be baptized. The parish priest asked him many questions to see whether he was fit for baptism. "Where was Jesus born? How many apostles did he have? How many years did he live? Where did he die? The poor man knew nothing of all these questions. Irritated, the priest then said, "At least you know prayers like the Our Father and the I Believe"? The man again shook his head. "What do you know then?" asked the priest flabbergasted. The man explained, "Before I met Jesus I was a drunkard who beat up my wife and children; I lost my job and was wasting my life." Then he continued, "But after encountering Jesus, I've quit drinking. I work hard and have begun to love my family. For me Jesus is my personal Saviour!"

A man went to a barbershop to have his hair cut and his beard trimmed. As the barber began to work, they began to have a good conversation. They talked about so many things and various subjects. When they eventually touched on the subject of God, the barber said: "I don't believe that God exists." "Why do you say that?" asked the customer. "Well, you just have to go out in the street to realize that God doesn't exist. Tell me, if God exists, would there be so many sick people? Would there be abandoned children? If God existed, there would be neither suffering nor pain. I can't imagine a loving God who would allow all of these things." The customer thought for a moment, but didn't respond because he didn't want to start an argument. Just after he left the barbershop, he saw a man in the street with long, stringy, dirty hair and an untrimmed beard. He looked dirty and unkempt. The customer turned back and entered the barber shop again and he said to the barber: "You know what? Barbers do not exist." "How can you say that?" asked the surprised barber. "I am here, and I am a barber. And I just worked on you!" No!" the customer exclaimed. "Barbers don't exist because if they did, there would be no people with dirty long hair and untrimmed beards, like that man outside." Ah, but barbers DO exist! That's what happens when people do not come to me." "Exactly!" affirmed the customer. "That's the point! God, too, DOES exist! That's what happens when people do not go to Him and don't look to Him for help. That's why there's so much pain and suffering in the world."

Fr. Eugene Lobo S.J. Bangalore, India