

Engaging with the weekly Lectionary Readings

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Comment and questions on this week's texts
Sunday 26 January 2014

26 January is the Third Sunday after the Epiphany (Ordinary Time) Year A

Isaiah 9:1-4 The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light." A word of hope for a land where Israel (Samaria) and Syria had fought most of their major battles in the past and were about to fight (or had already begun fighting) Judah without regard for the good of the people who called that land home.

"This week's reading from Isaiah may seem very familiar, not only because the text itself is familiar, but also because part of this same text was included in the first reading for Christmas Eve just one month ago. On Christmas Eve, it is paired with the reading from Luke describing the birth of Jesus and the coming of the shepherds. On Christmas Eve, we hear this text describe Jesus as the light in the darkness, a child born for us who will deliver us from bondage and uphold the kingdom forever, with emphasis on the birth of the child.

Today, however, a shorter selection from the same text (verses 1-4) supports this week's Gospel in making a different point. While Luke quotes Isaiah in connection with the birth of Jesus, Matthew quotes this same text to proclaim the prophetic significance of the beginning, the primary location, and the major theme of his public ministry. Light begins to dawn now that Jesus has headed directly into "Galilee of the Gentiles," the region controlled by the tetrarch Herod, who had just arrested John the Baptizer.

Jesus going to Galilee thus has a two-fold purpose. First, it is a fulfillment of this text from Isaiah. Light does shine precisely in this region formerly known as the tribal lands of Zebulun and Naphtali, places where Syria and the Northern Kingdom of Israel had fought their wars so "nothing important" was disturbed, and places later that became the target of "ethnic dilution campaigns" of one conqueror of Palestine after another. Keep the mix of languages and cultures there mixed enough, and oppressed enough, and no one of them will have the strength or the urge to resist the new overlords. This is why this place was known to Isaiah as "the land of deep darkness," and this is why it still had that nickname in the time of Jesus. If light is to shine in deep darkness, this is where Jesus must go.

But in the narrative itself, we see how this place continues to live up to its ancient reputation. The darkness at the heart of Galilee wasn't satisfied to keep to its own borders. The tetrarch Herod, like his namesake who ruled at the time of Jesus' birth, was noted for over-extending his power. John the Baptizer lived and worked primarily in Judea, not Galilee. Despite the fact that John was openly critical of Herod's taking the wife of his dead brother as his own wife, Herod had no real jurisdiction over John. And yet he had John arrested, jailed, and later, we learn, beheaded in Galilee.

That John was arrested and taken to a dungeon in Galilee becomes part of why Jesus headed there, too. He was not running away from Herod, as the phrase "he withdrew into Galilee" (fairly common in English translations) may suggest. A better translation would be something like "he made his home in that region again." Galilee became "home base" for Jesus' public ministry not just because an old prophet said so, but because the people there, governed by a man like Herod who had sought to silence John, desperately needed good news.

And that is what Jesus began to give them. Verse 17 represents the core of every sermon, every teaching and every action Jesus took in his public ministry there. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven [God] has drawn near." (Matthew uses "heaven" in place of "God," a sign of his Jewish heritage in what is unarguably the most Jewish of the gospels)."

Psalms 27:1, 4-9 This Psalm works as a response to the first reading if we join it as a prayer of those who live in a "land of deep darkness."

1 Corinthians 1:10-18 Paul says, "I appeal to you ... that there be no divisions among you ... be united in the same mind and the same purpose. ... Has Christ been divided?"

Questions to reflect on this passage:

Try to describe the situation in the Corinthian church using this passage.

Can you draw any parallels with other situations with which you are familiar?

How do we fall into the temptation of following people rather than Christ?

What is the “message of the cross”?

What unites us as Christians?

What would help you move into greater unity with fellow Christians?

Matthew 4:12-23 Jesus begins to announce the kingdom of God by the Sea of Galilee, healing, teaching, and calling fishermen to be his disciples.

“Jesus is walking along the shoreline, spies Simon Peter and Andrew fishing in the lake, and calls them both at once, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people” (v. 19). A little later he repeats the same process with two other fishermen, also brothers, James and John (v. 21).

Call, and immediate response. The word comes, and they all leave their livelihoods and families, everything and everyone they’ve got, and with James and John, and become disciples of Jesus, on the spot.

Why would they do that? Why would they leave nets, boats, livelihoods and family at the simplest of calls from Jesus? “Follow me!” It’s not because these men were especially sensitive to the voice of God or Jesus. Their dullness, resistance, contradiction of his teaching, denial and desertion of him later on show their level of faith wasn’t all that special, either.

What was special was Jesus’ message, a message he’d been proclaiming in the area already for a while before he called them: “The kingdom of God has drawn near” (v. 17). If that message were true, if Jesus were right about that, that’s a message worth leaving everything for. Why wouldn’t you want to be in on the ground floor of what would happen next?

Now remember where this is happening: Galilee of the Gentiles, land of deep darkness. Lands ravaged by outside forces, people treated as worthless. Jesus is declaring the kingdom of God drawing near here, right here - light in the darkness.

If the prophet’s words were ringing in their ears as Matthew rings them in ours, how could they do anything but follow Jesus?”

[Source](#)