

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year A

Isaiah 8: 23 - 9:3
Ps 27:1, 4, 13-14
I Cor 1:10-13,17
Matthew 4:12-23

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We are in the thick of political battles with all kinds of promises being made for a better, stronger, safer America. There is always the great temptation to fall into our political defaults: either to criticize the “cash and spend,” bleeding-heart democrats or to blast allegedly heartless, fiscally conservative republicans “who only care about policies that benefit the wealthy and powerful.” We are overloaded with sound bytes, staged political appearances and half-truths. Such stereotypes are too convenient and facile given the complexity of issues and the busyness of our lives. Whom are we to believe? There is no question that we are facing difficult times: the never ending war in Iraq which is costing a fortune, the crisis in the financial markets created from the bets made on sub-prime mortgages by the supposedly brilliant head fund managers and senior executives of the nation’s most powerful banks and mortgage companies, the resulting decline in the housing industry stock market, rising inflation and unemployment, the deterioration of the environment, to name only a few issues. In times of prosperity we tend to feel confident in our ability to secure our future through rising assets. Where do we turn when the tide changes and the answers to problems seem far from clear?

The prophet Isaiah attempted to reassure fellow Jews in the eighth century before Christ that despite the darkness of advancing Assyrian armies and the corruption of

government officials all is not lost: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.” The first reading from Isaiah with the promise of God’s help is indeed fulfilled in today’s Gospel as we hear the exotic names of the region of Zebulon and Naphtali repeated in Matthew’s direct quote from Isaiah. Matthew wrote for a Jewish audience and he continually demonstrates throughout his Gospel that Jesus alone fulfills the job description of the long awaited messiah. Yet the words Jesus preached are not the words we want to hear: Repent! Change! Convert! We want cheap grace to solve out problems instead of doing the hard work of introspection, self-reflection and willingness to take action.

How are we to be delivered from the present uncertainty? We need the clarity of Jesus’ teaching with his repeated warnings about being ready for the Kingdom and living here and now according to its logic where the “first will be last and vice versa.” Chances are those who live too comfortably here, indifferent to the cries of others, have already enjoyed their reward. I was amazed to discover that the etymology for the English word “candidate” actually derives from the Latin, *candidatus*. Even though I work regularly with Latin and know *candidus* is the Latin term for “white,” I had never thought of its connection with “a person seeking public office” who in Roman antiquity needed to make sure his toga was as white as possible to make a good impression. We want our candidates to be clean, honest and transparent. Yet we fail to recognize how difficult it is for us to do the same! Candidates are skilled at promoting themselves through the expert advice of campaign managers and image makers. They are self-appointed to respond to the clamoring desires of large, usually powerful constituencies. Disciples, on the other hand, like Peter and his brother Andrew, and the sons of Zebedee are “called.” So too are

we. In the final analysis none of us is smart enough to figure out why God called us and not others who are brighter, braver, stronger. We can only guess some of the reasons why Jesus was drawn to these particular men. As fishermen they must have been hard workers, adaptable, patient, persevering and courageous to deal with the sudden gales and storms at sea. The Sea of Galilee was shaped like a harp, eight miles wide and 32 miles around. Jesus began his public ministry in Galilee at the very moment when John the Baptist had been arrested prefiguring Jesus' own destiny and the risk that all of us take on as disciples.

We have just concluded the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity inaugurated by founder of the Franciscan Friars of the Atonement, Father Paul Watson, a former Episcopalian priest. He struggled within the Episcopalian communion early in the 20th century to convince clergy and laity of the need to reconcile the tragic divisions which had resulted from the Anglican break with the Bishop of Rome. He would certainly echo the concerns of Paul in today's second reading to the Corinthians, "that there be no divisions among you." Yet tragically the divisions within the Catholic Church today parallel in many ways the very factions condemned by Paul. How many identify more with their favorite ideological group than with the Church? He is a "right to life Catholic"; she belongs to "Voice of the Faithful," he is for a married clergy, she is pro ordination of women, he belongs to SNAP, she is in favor of the Tridentine Mass, he's a liberal theologian, she's an arch-conservative. I have even heard the proud expression of a bishop: "he's a John Paul II priest" as if priests ordained in the sixties and seventies were less loyal and orthodox.

Let's be content to be disciples of Christ pure and simple, accepting and tolerant

of other co-disciples of Christ. We all have different glimpses of the Lord and grasp various perspectives of his truth. But we need the full vision which Catholic communion offers with its embrace of the four corners of the world and the accumulated wisdom of twenty centuries of faithful witnesses from every walk of life and every nation and language.