

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle A

Isaiah 8: 23 – 9: 3

Psalms 27: 1, 4, 13-14

1 Corinthians 1: 10-13, 17

Matthew 4: 12-23

Rev. Charles B. Gordon, C.S.C.

The Garaventa Center

The University of Portland

“From that time on, Jesus began to preach and say, ‘Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.’” With these solemn words, Matthew marks the formal beginning of Jesus’ ministry. That he begins with a call for repentance indicates that Our Lord is carrying on in the tradition of John the Baptist, who had been arrested. But if the message is similar, the place where Jesus delivers it is not. John and virtually everyone else assumed that if repentance and renewal were going to occur, it would happen in the spiritual heartland of the people, where the worship of Yahweh remained most fervent and pure. Jesus’ approach is radically different. He begins his ministry in the least promising place – in “Galilee of the Gentiles” – a region proverbial for its apostasy. If John preached where the light of faith still shone, Jesus speaks where the darkness is greatest. He has the audacity to proclaim his message near the government center at Sepphoris, in the region of the Decapolis – ten cities where a great many Jews had abandoned the faith of their ancestors to follow the traditions of the Greeks. As the prophet Isaiah foretells in our first reading, it was to be these people walking in darkness who would see the great light. Remarkably, Matthew even implies that the gentiles themselves would hear the Word and embrace it.

Our Lord's tactic might offer encouragement and instruction to his disciples today. Like our master, we shouldn't hesitate to pursue our efforts at evangelization in contexts that seem unlikely, or even threatening. We need to brave our own Sepphoris and reach out to our own Decapolis. "Preaching to the choir" will not serve. Rather, we should try to identify the heart of darkness in our own time and place, and strive to set it alight for Christ. If sometimes the heart of darkness is our own, we'll need humility enough to open ourselves up to the light. If we feel discouraged – if it seems our world is willfully forgetful of Christ and doggedly determined to achieve its own destruction – we can be encouraged to remember that those very circumstances were chosen by Jesus as ideal for the proclamation of the Good News. It is where he chose to begin.

Notice too that as soon as the beginning of his ministry is announced, starting with the very next verse, Jesus begins to call together his band of disciples. And the first people he calls to join him are two sets of brothers. This serves as a reminder to us that evangelization is something we do together. If we intend to share the Good News, rather than set out on our own, our first step should be to identify the community of evangelization of which we are a part. Who are the brothers and sisters with whom we will offer witness? We're in this together – in Christ, together. Let's get to work.