

Isaiah 9:1-4; 1 Corinthians 1:10-18; Matthew 4:12-23

This Sunday we celebrate the third Sunday after Epiphany. The Epiphany season, which runs until Lent, emphasizes Christ's divinity and his mission. Today's Old Testament reading (Is 9:1-4) and Gospel (Matt 4:12-23) focus on the beginning of Jesus' preaching ministry in Galilee.

Here in Germany, we are still in the dark of winter. Not only are the days dark, but the world also seems to be in a very dark place with war, oppression and lawlessness all around. When the prophet wrote this passage, the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, i.e. Galilee, had suffered terrible affliction. Assyria had conquered it and sent its people into exile. We heard that in the future, God would honour Galilee of the nations by way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan (v.1). The Jews would not return there until 104 B.C. when the Hasmonean King Aristobulus I conquered it - and yet Isaiah 9:2 promised that the people there would see a great light.

This eventually came to pass when Jesus began his public ministry and preaching at approximately 30 years of age, occurring around 27-29 A.D. His ministry commenced shortly after his baptism by John the Baptist. When Jesus heard that John had been arrested and imprisoned by King Herod he withdrew first into Galilee and then made his home in Capernaum, which is on the lakeside. It was as if he had closed the door of his home and opened the door that stood in front of him. It was a moment of decision. In our lives such moments come, these moments of decision. The Scottish preacher William Barclay said it is always better to meet them with an even surgical cut than to wander undecided between two courses of action. The new life the Jesus had begun was in the most northerly district of Palestine. Being on the coast of the Sea of Galilee it enabled him to be a new teacher with a message and he had the chance of being heard. It was there that Jesus began his mission and first announced his message.

The people who Jesus selected were fishermen. Matthew who wrote about the beginning of Jesus' work with a group of fishermen remembered the words of Isaiah. After prophesying judgement and doom, he proclaimed the dawn of a new hope in the birth of a descendant of David who would establish a kingdom of peace. Yet not in Jerusalem and Judah will the light first dawn but in the northmost part of the land of Israel, a region which lay in darkness and death at the time Jesus came to fulfil the ancient prophecy, and which John the Baptist had not been able to reach by his call to repentance.

So why did these men give it all up to follow a wandering preacher? The same question faces people today. Why did this person give up a promising legal career to become a preacher, throwing away a lifetime of high earnings for the insecurity and poverty of pastoring and teaching a church? Why did that person abandon her remarkable gifts as a singer in order to study theology and get ordained? Why did this person become a teacher, another help old people? Why do Christians in millions of other walks of life regularly give up attractive and lucrative [jobs] in order to maintain honesty, integrity, faith, hope and love?

The answer can only be in Jesus himself, and in the astonishing magnetism of his presence 2,000 years ago. Sometimes his call comes slowly, starting like a faint murmur and growing until we can no longer ignore it. Sometimes he calls people as suddenly and dramatically as he called Peter and Andrew, James and John. When that happens to you, by whatever means and whatever pace, you will know, Jesus has a way of getting through and whatever we are engaged with – whatever nets we are mending, or fish catching – somehow, we will be sufficiently aware of his presence and call to know what it is we're being asked to do.

At least we will know that we are being asked to follow him. We won't necessarily know where it is all going to lead and we wouldn't perhaps be quite so eager if we did. "You will be catching people now!" was what Jesus said to Peter and Andrew. Did they have any idea that both of them would end up being crucified as their master would be? Did James, the brother of John, have the slightest idea that within a few years he would be dead, killed on the order of Herod?

They didn't. God in his mercy reveals things little by little. Most of us here this morning, especially those of us who are elderly, have known not just one problem but a mountain of events that have overwhelmed us.

Jesus' ministry, though it was exercised throughout all Galilee, was confined almost exclusively, so this gospel concentrates on the people of Israel. It was in the synagogues for the most part that his teaching was first given, and it was among the Jewish people that his hand was stretched out to heal. There was no kind of illness, Matthew suggests, that Jesus failed to cure; and among the numerous patients brought to him were those tormented by the most acute forms of physical and mental derangement – epileptics and paralytics. And wherever Jesus went, great crowds followed him, consisting not simply of Galileans but also of some who had journeyed from the free Greek cities to the South of the Sea of Galilee. This was the beginning of God's desire to change the world. Sadly, the powers of darkness would lead him to the cross.

On the cross, Jesus broke the burden of sin and death and the rod of the oppressive powers and principalities that ruled over us. Matthew 4:17 tells us that Jesus said "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." That means, we should examine ourselves, accept forgiveness through Christ our Saviour and resolve to follow him as Lord. This makes us members of God's kingdom. Jesus is the light of the world. But he, in turn, calls us to reflect his light so that we will be the light of the world (Matt 5:14-16). He tells us to "let our light shine before others so that they may see our good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

May our light shine in this dark world so that those who see it give glory to God.