

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A

A significant motif in today's readings is the fulfilment of prophecy. The first extract is from Isaiah who was making the point that those Israelites who observed Torah and put their faith in God always prospered. The prophet refers to the historical fact that the lands of the two northern tribes of Zebulun and Naphthali were the first provinces of Israel to be overrun by the invading Assyrian armies in 733 BCE. Nazareth was in the tribal region of Zebulun, and Naphthali took in the north-western shore of the Sea of Galilee and all the western shore, thereby including towns such as Capernaum, Magdala and Tiberias. Isaiah describes this invasion as darkness falling on the northern regions because of their infidelity to their God. However, Isaiah's message is one of reassurance that God will restore these lands to Israel.

Isaiah 8:23-9:3 The prophet's oracle introduces the idea that one day an ideal king will, in harmony with God's directions and expectations, rule Israel in a time of peace and prosperity. This outcome is the light that Isaiah writes about; the light that will shine when oppression is overcome and the burden of occupation is lifted. History shows that later kings like Hezekiah and Josiah were fine rulers but never quite measured up to the prophetic portrait of the ideal king.

Matthew, no doubt representing early Christian tradition, saw Jesus' Galilean announcement of the coming of God's kingdom as a fulfilment of this prophecy. But where Isaiah had in mind the model Davidic king presiding over a golden age in the land of Israel, the essence of this prophetic statement was transferred and became perfectly applicable to the spiritual realm that Jesus proclaimed. We see how this happens in today's gospel passage from Matthew.

Psalm 26/27 The responsorial psalm picks up the metaphor of Isaiah and declares the Lord to be true light and the ultimate rock of recovery and freedom. The whole of this psalm expresses the hope of rescue and the expectation of acquittal for past infidelity. Later in the psalm the poet says that even if his mother and father abandoned him, God would always take him in. Here is an expression of confidence in God who is both father and mother to him. He draws on the strongest human relationship of parent to child to speak of the God who has captured his entire being.

To get closer to God the psalmist pours out his heart's desire, which is to serve in the house of the Lord all the days of his life. This gives us a clue to the identity of the poet as a Levite who belongs to the chorus of psalm singers who serve in the temple. There is a measure of ecstasy in the singer's contemplation of the rising sun that fills him with a sense of the radiance of God, who is a God of the living, drawing all creation to life.

Paul's letters give us insights into women's participation in the life of the early church

1 Corinthians 1:10-13 The second reading continues Paul's opening remarks in his letter to the Corinthians. A little later, Paul will refer to the earlier letter he wrote to this community, so this letter is actually his second letter. In fact, the previous letter has been lost, so this one has always been dubbed First Corinthians. Paul's opening words refer to the disagreements that have arisen among the Christians in Corinth and he is pleading with them to put away their differences and be united. He has learned of the situation from Chloe's people, probably employees or servants of Chloe who travelled on business to Ephesus and gave Paul an update on Corinth. One little historical fact we learn from this is that Chloe was a woman of means and influence who had converted to the Jesus people, becoming a significant member of the community in Corinth. A careful reading of all Paul's letters tells us quite a lot about the status of women in Greco-Roman society as well as giving us insights into women's participation in the life and structure of early Christian communities. Today's church hierarchy might do well to read these letters carefully and reflect on the role and activity of women in the life of the early church.

We learn from this reading that the Corinthians were adopting a stance that was typical of people in Greco-Roman society who became attracted to the message and way of life of different philosophers. We tend to see philosophy as an intellectual pursuit, but in the ancient Greek world philosophers were teachers who advocated a way of life to match their theories. So, to embrace a given philosophy you had to follow the lifestyle demanded by that philosophy. You could not have just a passing interest as an intellectual hobby, you had to commit. So, when some Corinthian Christians were saying 'I am for Cephas' or 'I am for Apollos' they were announcing their allegiance and commitment to these leaders. Cephas, by the way, is a rendering of the Aramaic nickname given by Jesus to Simon. In Aramaic *Cepha* is rock, and this translated into Greek as *Petra* (rock) and into Latin as *Petrus*. Peter had visited Corinth and some of the community were

obviously following the social custom of aligning themselves with him as to a Greek philosopher. Apollos, likewise, was a Christian spreading the Gospel and winning over people to Christ. Paul is implying that this division in the community is pretty silly since we are all committed to Jesus Christ and he is the only figure that deserves our total allegiance.

This extract concludes with a revealing statement from Paul that he saw himself as a spreader of the good news about Jesus Christ and not a figure who performs baptism – that was the role of leaders in individual communities. Paul functioned as a peripatetic, wandering from city to city to convince people of the truth of Christ’s message or philosophy. Now, this was certainly a philosophy that expected commitment to a way of life. It was way beyond a mere intellectual or theoretical pursuit or hobby. Paul always hammered home the point that you cannot be a half-hearted Christian. To be authentic we need to sign on to the Christ message and commit to the Christian way of life.

Matthew 4:12-23 We have already alluded to the force of the gospel reading, which is Matthew’s way of seeing prophecy fulfilled in the person and ministry of Jesus. Jesus clears out of Judea, prompted by the arrest of his inspiring leader, John, and goes back to his home territory of Galilee. This only confirms in his mind the need to respond to the prophetic call that was solidified and realised during his 40-day retreat in the desert. This time of discernment also convinced him that his task was different from the ministry of John; he had a different message to proclaim, namely, his vision of the reign of God. For Matthew and the early disciples, Jesus is the light who will lift the darkness, and so Matthew has no problem quoting Isaiah’s allusion to the ideal leader sent by God to rescue the people.

Jesus realised he needed help to carry out his mission

One powerful insight that is emphasised by Matthew is that Jesus realises his task cannot be carried out alone. He is mature and practical enough to see that he needs help and begins to gather to himself people who can share the mission with him and be companions on the journey. Some of these disciples are offered an invitation, others are impressed by this man to the point of asking to join with him. Matthew gives us an idealised picture of men seeing Jesus and straightaway abandoning their jobs and taking up with him. In reality, they would have heard Jesus speak in the marketplace or in someone’s house and would have been intrigued and keen to find out more. This could well have disposed them to be ready to heed the call when it came. Luke reveals that women also took up as disciples and followed Jesus wherever he went.

Matthew ends this scene with a sweeping generalisation depicting Jesus wandering ‘the whole’ of Galilee teaching in the synagogues and proclaiming the kind of world that could be, if people dedicated themselves to living by the values of God, putting love and compassion above all other interests and goals. Matthew adds that Jesus went about curing all kinds of sickness and disease, which implies that he could back up all his teaching with deeds that showed how divine power was working through him. This automatically puts Jesus in the company of the prophets adding authority to his words.

What sort of a Jesus do we see in these texts? Certainly not the founder of a religion and most definitely not a person saying, ‘shape up or ship out.’ It’s hard to see Jesus at work through cardinals, bishops and whoever else are accusing Pope Francis of wrecking the church and being a heretic, when all he is doing is calling us back to the teachings and spirituality of Jesus. One key thing we get from today’s readings is that Jesus was connected; he was in touch with people and they were attracted to him because he made sense with an authenticity that set him apart from the religious establishment. He was not a control freak. There was no ceremony or grab for power in the person of Jesus. Recall what Mark wrote around fifteen years before Matthew, ‘They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes’ (Mark 1:22).



Authenticity is the daily practice of letting go of who we think we’re supposed to be, and embracing who we are.

Brené Brown (American author and researcher in Social Work)



I said to the Gym instructor, ‘Can you teach me to do the splits?’ He said, ‘How flexible are you?’
I said, ‘I can’t make Tuesdays.’

Laurie Woods