

3rd Sunday Ordinary Time, Year A

Today's readings focus on Jesus, the light who dispels the darkness in our hearts and in our world. They focus, too, on the call he makes to each of us and to us as a parish community to welcome his light and to carry on his mission of radiating that light to others. If we are going to say Yes to this mission we will have to follow the example of the first disciples, and let go anything that is hindering us from responding to the call.

The First Reading comes from Isaiah who lived through the terror of the Assyrian invasion of Palestine towards the close of the 8th century before Christ. After describing the spread of oppression, however, he offers hope to his contemporaries by telling them God was promising to send a light into their midst that would dispel the gloom by breaking the yoke laid on them by Assyria. In the Gospel Matthew refers back to this passage of Scripture when he tells us of Jesus' ministry in Galilee. Jesus did what Isaiah promised. He brought light to those living in darkness and despair, and, by his love, he broke the yoke that kept people trapped, and released people from the burdens that separated them from God and prevented them from living to the full. In these first weeks of Ordinary Time we are preparing to journey with Jesus through his public ministry. The Church wants us to begin this journey in hope, knowing that to follow Jesus, whatever the suffering involved, is to set out on a journey of liberation: liberation for ourselves and liberation for others. As John puts it: 'If the Son sets you free you will indeed be free'(John 8:36).

The Responsorial Psalm is a song of joy from a person who has known darkness but who experiences the joy of walking in the light of God's love. He has known fear but now he is afraid of no one for he finds his strength in God. Like so many of the characters of the Gospel he has found meaning in God's love and he wants nothing else than to dwell in God's sanctuary all the days of his life. We are meant to make this song our own. Here we are in God's sanctuary, surrounded by our fellow Christians and we are about to receive Jesus himself into our hearts in communion when our bodies will, in a special way, become the sanctuary in which Jesus himself delights to dwell. There is darkness in our lives and oppression and fear. The Psalmist is showing us how to overcome fear by entering into the deepest recesses of our hearts, for God dwells there. Our lives are sometimes tossed about like the sea in a storm, but deep down we can find peace in the presence of God. We are reminded of the famous words of Saint Teresa of Avila: 'Let nothing trouble you. Let nothing frighten you. Everything passes. God never changes. Patience obtains all. Whoever has God wants for nothing. God alone is enough'(Poesias 30).

In the Second Reading, Paul speaks of the power of the cross. It is the power of God's love shining in the heart of Jesus in his darkest hour. The crucifixion could not obscure the light. In fact the light shines out all the more clearly because of the surrounding darkness. This is the high point of Jesus' ministry, a ministry which began some three years earlier in Galilee where Jesus first showed how near God is to us and how healing

God's love can be if we open our minds and hearts to that love.

- Continuation on the theme of light

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Light is a favourite theme of the Gospel. In one of the early scenes in Luke's Gospel, Zechariah is holding Baby John the Baptist in his arms. He pronounces the following prophecy: 'By the tender mercy of our God the dawn from on high will break upon us to give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace'(Luke 1:78-79). The dawn he promises is realised in the next scene with the birth of Jesus. You probably know that we celebrate Christmas on 25th December because that used to be the winter solstice in the northern hemisphere. The Christian community was making the point that Jesus came into our world on the shortest, coldest and darkest day, and that every day after that became longer, warmer and brighter.

Jesus himself said once: 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life'(John 8:12).

On the subject of our mission to embrace the light and to share it with others, Paul wrote: 'It is the God who said "Let light shine out of darkness", who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God on the face of Jesus'(2Corinthians 4:6). The face of Jesus radiated love, and so revealed who God really is. We are graced to do the same. Left to ourselves we cannot do it, but the prayer of today's Mass reads: 'O God, the love you offer always exceeds the furthest expression of our human longing'. What an extraordinarily beautiful statement! Our human longing for love and light and freedom is immense. We are being assured that the love God offers us is even greater. The prayer goes on to ask God: 'direct each thought and each effort so that our limits will not obscure God's glory'. We have limits, but God wants to fill our souls with his light and he wants it to radiate out to others. Our limits do not have to get in the road. God can even use them to reveal the mystery of his love.

I love the mantra prayed by the Hindu yogi, Yogananda, as he was dying. He had a devotion to Jesus and referring to his body as a temple he prayed to Jesus: 'In this your temple, with your own hand, light the lamp of your love. Turn my darkness into light. Turn my darkness into light.'

Let us open our hearts to receive Jesus in communion and ask him to turn any darkness inside us into his light.

- Continuation on the theme of mission

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To follow Jesus, the fishermen had to leave their fishing. We, too, must be willing to let go anything that gets in the way of his call. This is the basic Christian virtue sometimes spoken of as detachment. It is not a matter of refraining from becoming really involved

in this world. God loves the world, and Jesus longed to heal it so that we would live to the full. Disciples of Jesus are committed to undertake God's project for the world with all their hearts and minds and with all their energy. If fishing is our occupation we should mend our nets and do it properly. But if God calls us to something else we must be ready to leave everything and anything to do his will.

The French palaeontologist and Jesuit, Teilhard de Chardin, expresses this well in *The Divine Milieu*: 'God does not deflect our gaze prematurely from the work he himself has given us, since he presents himself to us as attainable only through that very work. Nor does God blot out, in his intense light, the detail of our earthly aims, since the closeness of our union with him is in fact determined by the exact fulfilment of the least of our tasks ... It is a matter of life and death that the earth should flourish to the utmost of its natural powers... Far too many Christians are insufficiently conscious of the divine responsibility of their lives. They live just like other people, giving only half of themselves, never experiencing the spur or the intoxication of advancing the kingdom of God in every domain of humankind. If you must blame us, then blame our weakness, not our faith. Our faith imposes upon us the right and the duty to throw ourselves into the things of the earth'.

Christian detachment calls us to be attached to people and to things in such a way that we are willing to let them go if ever and whenever we are called to do so. Furthermore, detachment is not possible for us on our own initiative. We can leave what we love only when called and graced to do so. Jesus' first disciples did, indeed, leave their father and their nets but only in response to Jesus' call to accompany him.

It is our privilege to be Jesus' instruments to achieve harmony in the world, countering the effects of sin by the purity of our living and our loving. As we open our hearts to receive his healing and forgiveness, let us be ready to receive his call to take the message of reconciliation out to others. I conclude with a prayer composed by Cardinal Henry Newman: 'Dear Jesus, help me spread your fragrance everywhere I go. Flood me with your Spirit and life. Penetrate and possess my whole being so utterly that all my life may be only a radiance of yours. Shine through me and be so in me that every person I come in contact with may feel your presence in my soul.'