

Cycle A Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Reading 1 IS 8:23-9:3

First the Lord degraded the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali; but in the end he has glorified the seaward road, the land west of the Jordan, the District of the Gentiles. Anguish has taken wing, dispelled is darkness: for there is no gloom where but now there was distress. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom a light has shone. You have brought them abundant joy and great rejoicing, as they rejoice before you as at the harvest, as people make merry when dividing spoils. For the yoke that burdened them, the pole on their shoulder, and the rod of their taskmaster you have smashed, as on the day of Midian.

Responsorial Psalm PS 27:1, 4, 13-14

R. (1a) The Lord is my light and my salvation.

The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom should I fear? The LORD is my life's refuge; of whom should I be afraid?

R. The Lord is my light and my salvation.

One thing I ask of the LORD; this I seek: To dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, That I may gaze on the loveliness of the LORD and contemplate his temple.

R. The Lord is my light and my salvation.

I believe that I shall see the bounty of the LORD in the land of the living. Wait for the LORD with courage; be stouthearted, and wait for the LORD.

R. The Lord is my light and my salvation.

Reading 2 1 COR 1:10-13, 17

I urge you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree in what you say, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and in the same purpose. For it has been reported to me about you, my brothers and sisters, by Chloe's people, that there are rivalries among you. I mean that each of you is saying, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ." Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with the wisdom of human eloquence, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its meaning.

Gospel MT 4:12-23

When Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and went to live in Capernaum by the sea, in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali, that what had been said through Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled: Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the way to the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles, the people who sit in darkness have seen a great light, on those dwelling in a land overshadowed by death light has arisen. From that time on, Jesus began to preach and say, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." As he was walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon who is called Peter, and his brother Andrew, casting a net into the sea; they were fishermen. He said to them, "Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men." At once they left their nets and followed him. He walked along from there and saw two other brothers, James, the son of Zebedee, and his brother John. They were in a boat, with their father Zebedee, mending their nets. He called them, and immediately they left their boat and their father and followed him. He went around all of Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and curing every disease and illness among the people.

Thinking about today's readings made me wonder if some of the geography in today's readings hold the promise of unexpected revelation. Scriptures are frequently punctuated with geographic references. Some of them like Bethlehem or Jerusalem are familiar to us. Others are a little more obscure like the lands of Zebulun and Naphtali mentioned in the first reading and Gospel. This area, in the north of Palestine – better known as Galilee, – is the place where Jesus grew up and began his ministry. While as the crow flies it was only about 70 miles north of Jerusalem, it was socially and culturally quite different, probably because it had been invaded so often with foreign armies frequently marching across this land.

But the northerners were different in another way, holding to a kind of tribal thinking dating back to the time of the 12 tribes. Zebulun and Naphtali were two of the 12 sons of Jacob and the place of their legacy believed that they were directly under God's rule. Even at the time of Jesus this area had a reputation of being politically independent minded, even rebellious.

Galilee was quite different from the southern province of Judea with its holy city of Jerusalem – different racially, economically, culturally, linguistically. One New Testament scholar offers this caricature of Jesus the northerner when visiting his southern cousins: even an impeccably Jewish Galilean, like Jesus, in first-century Jerusalem was not among his own people; he was as much a foreigner as a Texan in New York. His accent would immediately mark him out as “not one of us,” and all the communal prejudice of the supposedly superior culture of the capital city would stand against his claim to be heard even as a prophet, let alone as the “Christ,” a title which, as everyone knew, belonged to Judea.

But as in many good stories, geography is an important actor. In fact, geography is an important Gospel character, most dramatically in the Gospel of Luke which pivots when

Jesus turns toward Jerusalem (9:51) but also, here in Matthew. It both fascinating and enlightening to consider Jesus not only as a bumpkin from a backwater town (“could any good come from Nazareth?” as said in the book of John 1:46), but that Jesus was also from a part of the country that has a reputation for being rebellious, independent and maybe even what one commentator labels “from a hot bed of banditry.” Jesus the rebel, Jesus the free thinker, Jesus the bandit...now there’s a string of titles we probably haven’t heard before.

There is strong evidence that we have deep affection for bandits, rebels and apple-cart upsetters. Think about the way we cheer on Butch Cassidy and his Sundance buddy, Captain Jack Sparrow, our favorite Disney Pirate, and Robin Hood and his many reincarnations. Jesus as charming bandit maybe pushing the limits here, but in today’s Gospel he easily stole two professional fishermen away from their nets and wives, and absconded with two others from their father’s business with apparently little less than a wink and a smile. While no prince, he must have been charming. But the unique revelation in Jesus’ banditry is that it did not diminish others but only uplifted them ...ultimately, he was not lifted himself except on a cross.

Jesus did symbolically steal from the rich, the elite, the clergy: he punctured their arrogance, their overblown piety and their self-inflated dignity, and raised up the marginalized, the leprous, the adulterous, and widowed and despised.

But in doing so Bandit Jesus did not deprive the rich, the elite, the clergy from kingdom richness but instead invited them into new richness through a narrow gate inviting them to bow low as he did in his own incarnation.

In the end, this only-begotten bandit stole dehumanization back from humanity, stole marginalization back from the marginalized, stole abuse back from the abused,

stole distain back from the distained, stole despair from the despairing, and stole the sting from death from all of humanity.

In words reverberating through today's Psalm – Jesus stole back darkness from every darkened heart and planted light in every point on the map willing to kindle it in every community wanting to embrace it, in everyone who accepted that modest candle, and in every soul hoping and dreaming of stepping into the sun.

But here's that problematic "so what" which rears its demanding head every time we plunge into the mystery of God.

There is so much darkness, greed, prejudice among us, in our workplaces and schools and church and most problematic in our families. We are commissioned to kidnap it subvert it, oppose it, and reject it. In place of the stolen darkness, greed and intolerance we must replant Christ's light, Jesus hope, radical hospitality, crucified love, and Gospel peace.

I have to be careful not to invoke a favorite text too often because it could be misconstrued as pushing a Franciscan agenda...But I gladly risk the subversion again this morning, in the spirit of a Jesuit pope smart enough to call himself Francis and pray:

Lord, make me an instrument of your
peace.

Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
and where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so
much seek

to be consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand;
to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive;
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
and it is in dying that we are born to
eternal life.