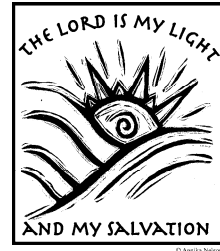


**3<sup>RD</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME A: 2008      JANUARY 27, 2008**

**FR. JOE SOBIERAJSKI, S.J.**

**ISAIAH 8:23—9:3    1 CORINTHIANS 1:10-13, 17**

**MATTHEW 4:12-23**



Geography was probably my favorite subject when I was in grammar school. I loved learning about countries far away, about the people who lived there, and about the produce and manufactured goods they produced. I have to admit, however, that what I learned in school in the fifties does not hold me in good stead today especially when the news brings in the countries of Africa and Asia, many of which have changed names in the fifty years since I studied them. As a matter of fact, much to my chagrin I know that I could not put together a decent map of Africa today in the way that I was able in 1953 when the Belgian Congo seemed to occupy most of the continent.

Unfortunately my ignorance of World Geography is not unusual for most Americans, and the same could probably be said about our ignorance of Biblical Geography. As a child I always wondered how vast the Sinai desert must have been that it took the Hebrews forty years to cross it. Even today when we hear the names of Galilee, Jericho, Caesarea Philippi, Sidon, and Lebanon, although they may still be existent places, I wonder just how clear a picture most of us have of the geography of the Holy Land and the meaning that it plays in Scripture.

That is particularly true as we listen to our readings this morning. Matthew tells us that when He hears of John the Baptist's arrest, Jesus makes a significant move. He leaves Nazareth the town where He has grown up, the place to which the Holy Family returned after leaving Egypt, and withdraws to Galilee to live at Capernaum by the sea.

This is all very specific and for good reason. Nazareth was a small town in the south western part of Galilee, while Capernaum was twenty three miles to the northeast near the furthest most point and on the cost of the Sea of Galilee. On the lake, Capernaum was surrounded by many busy and prosperous towns, an ideal place to begin a career as an itinerant rabbi if one wished to reach a wider audience. It is, however, within the context of our First Reading from Isaiah and which Matthew quotes in his passage that the real meaning lays. "Land of Zebulon and land of Naphtali, the way to the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles, the people who lived in darkness have seen a great light, on those dwelling in the

land overshadowed by death, light has arisen.” In 734 BC the Assyrians made this area of Galilee into an Assyrian province. And so the first area of the tribal lands of the Jews to be swept into the darkness of the pagans is to be the first to receive the Light of Redemption. Even beyond this, as Jesus makes Capernaum His home, He moves to an area which is known as the “Galilee of the Gentiles” making it clear from the very beginning of His public life that He comes not merely for the Chosen People, the Jews, but for all men and women, Jew or pagan, who desire to live in the Light. Here at the very beginning of His ministry, Jesus strikes the note on which He sends His Apostles at the very end of Matthew’s Gospel “Go make disciples of all nations.”

Preaching with what seems a sense of urgency Jesus takes up where John left off; “Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand.” With that same urgency He seems bound to gather about Him His first disciples. He sees Peter and Andrew calls them to be “Fishers of men” and they leave their nets and follow. John and James also drop their nets and leave their father in his boat to follow the Lord, it seems, without question. From there He goes all around Galilee preaching in the synagogues, and curing the sick. There is a kind of breathlessness here at the beginning of the Public Life that emphasizes the importance of what He is about and the reality of the Kingdom, the reign of God already begun.

The Kingdom is a reality, but it can only become more fully real by the self-giving of those who proclaim its presence. Jesus has left home and family; the Apostles seem to have done the same. Placing the reign of God at the center of all makes it become more present. Every time Jesus heals, His words and actions proclaim the Kingdom. As He teaches throughout Matthew His parables reveal that the Kingdom is a challenge. It is here yet it is not yet here in its fullness, which will only come in His Second Coming. In the meantime, for both the Apostles and for us, the Kingdom *is* and at the same time *is not yet!*

It is a perplexing and sometimes confusing way to live out our Christian life between what is and what is not yet. The Kingdom of God, or as Matthew calls it, the Kingdom of Heaven is at the very heart of Jesus’ preaching. It is the reign and rule of God which makes up the Kingdom: the rule of God in each of our hearts, the rule of God in our communities, the rule of God in our world renewing and reconciling all things to Himself.

We listen to Paul’s Epistles nearly every Sunday, but sometimes we miss that fact that for the most part they are written to address certain problems or difficulties that have arisen in those communities since Paul was last there. His *First Letter to the Corinthians* which we will be hearing for the next six Sundays will focus on the problem of unity within the

Corinthian community. After calling for them to be one in Christ, with the same mind and purpose, he tells them what he has heard about the schism among them, some claiming to belong to Apollo, other Cephas, others Paul, and still others Christ. What concerns Paul about these divisions is that they can result in parties or groups that become not only rivals but even enemies. Paul, in his usual directness, asks them if “Is Christ divided?” That would be absurd since it was Christ who was crucified and in whose Name they were baptized. Anything that divides them causes the Body of Christ to be torn apart, while unity gives them the strength they need. It is not difficult for us to understand Paul’s concern since the various divisions and fractures that have occurred among those of us who profess to be the Body of Christ, like the Great Schism between the Eastern and Western Churches or the Protestant Reformation, have transformed the Body of Christ into thousands of denominations and sects, all of whom see themselves as somehow possessing the Truth and the others as not or at least not fully. Since unity is one of the key characteristics of the Kingdom of God, the more we who call ourselves Christians are divided, the more we seem to wander from the unity that the Kingdom demands.

Our readings today it seems are meant to call us into action. Just as Christ called Peter and Andrew, James and John, He calls us today because the Kingdom depends as much on us today as it did on them and the rest of the Apostles and disciples in Christ’s time. Paul counsels us as he does his Corinthians to beware of factions, since they do nothing but divide the Body of Christ and sap its strength. If we are not to be fractious, then our call is to be reconcilers who bring unity and its strength to our brothers and sisters.

If the Kingdom of God has this somewhat illusive quality of both “now” and “not yet,” how do we avoid the blindness, prejudice and fear that not only keeps us from building up the Kingdom, but which also helps to tear it down? Paul seems to tell us that we do so by keeping our focus on the Crucified Christ.

In a few minutes we will join hands and as we pray the Lord’s Prayer as we do every day and we will ask that that the Lord’s Kingdom will come. It is a prayer with special meaning for us because in it we repeat the Lord’s own Words which we make our own. When we humbly pray those words we acknowledge our sinfulness and our need to offer forgiveness if we expect our Father to offer us life and forgiveness in turn.

Unlike Galilee or Africa, the geography of God’s Kingdom is difficult to map out since it is not restricted by space and time. It starts with the hearts of each of us. Sometimes those hearts are rocky and hard not allowing God entrance, and sometimes they are fleshy hearts that can

easily be won by the Lord. But, this is where the Kingdom starts if we only allow the Lord to lay claim to it. Like Peter and Andrew it requires some self-giving on our part, but if we choose to follow Him, our weakness is replaced by His strength, our fear by His courage, our doubts by His strong faith, and then we too become in our own lives fishers of men and women by allowing His Light to be reflected in us. “The Kingdom of God is at hand.” *Do you build it up, or do you tear it down?*