

3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle A

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

1st Reading - Isaiah 8:23 - 9:3

Today we hear from a portion of Isaiah called the “Book of Emmanuel.” This book encompasses chapters 7 through 12. The portion we read from today is titled “The Prince of Peace.” The events described in Chapters 7 through 12 took place between 735 and 733 B.C. It is the Syro-Ephramitic war which is concisely described in 2 Kings 16:5-9 “*⁵ Then Rezin, king of Aram, and Pekah, son of Remaliah, king of Israel, came up to Jerusalem to attack it. Although they besieged Ahaz, they were unable to conquer him. ⁶ At the same time the king of Edom recovered Elath for Edom, driving the Judeans out of it. The Edomites then entered Elath, which they have occupied until the present. ⁷ Meanwhile, Ahaz sent messengers to Tiglath-pileser, king of Assyria, with the plea: “I am your servant and your son. Come up and rescue me from the clutches of the king of Aram and the king of Israel, who are attacking me.” ⁸ Ahaz took the silver and gold that were in the temple of the LORD and in the palace treasuries and sent them as a present to the king of Assyria, ⁹ who listened to him and moved against Damascus, which he captured. He deported its inhabitants to Kir and put Rezin to death.”*

Isaiah’s task was to guide Judah through one of the most critical periods in her history. With the death of Uzziah in 742 B.C., Judah’s time of prosperity and national glory had come to an end. The shadow of Assyria lay menacingly over the land. In his lifetime Isaiah saw the northern kingdom of Israel swept away in the tide of conquest and his own land of Judah invaded by the mighty Assyrian armies. But the spiritual crisis of Judah was even more serious than the threat of physical destruction. Greed, hypocrisy and injustice were sapping the spiritual integrity of Judah. There was also the national loss of nerve that led its rulers to seek an accommodation with Assyria and her gods, thus undermining the very foundation of Judah’s existence as a covenanted people. Judah’s king was the descendent of David to whom an eternal dynasty had been promised (2 Samuel 17). With Assyria sweeping all before her, many of the Judeans began to doubt the power of Yahweh to preserve the dynasty of David in accordance with His promises. Others took an opposite but equally unspiritual position; interpreting the covenant with David as a guarantee of absolute invincibility no matter what crimes were committed against Yahweh. When religion becomes a blank check for national wrongdoing, the end is not far off; no one saw this better than Isaiah. King Uzziah had been succeeded by Jotham (ruled 742 - 735 B.C.) who was succeeded by Ahaz (ruled 735 - 715 B.C.).

Isaiah looked for a successor to Ahaz in whom the promise of the dynasty would be realized; in our reading today Isaiah describes him and the deliverance his coming would occasion.

8:23 First he degraded the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali;

Zebulun and Naphtali were the first provinces of Israel to be overrun. Some of the population of these territories was sent into exile.

but in the end he has glorified the seaward road, the land West of the Jordan, the District of the Gentiles.

Eventually God will restore the ravaged lands to their former glory. Our gospel reading for today sees in Jesus' Galilean proclamation of the kingdom of God the fulfillment of this prophecy.

Anguish has taken wing, dispelled is darkness; for there is no gloom where but now there was distress. ^{9:1} The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; Upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom a light has shone. ² You have brought them abundant joy and great rejoicing, As they rejoice before you as at the harvest, as men make merry when dividing spoils. ³ 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.

The yoke, pole and rod are symbols of Assyrian oppression. The captive's condition is compared to that of a harnessed farm animal, a fairly common image of enslavement. Usually the yoke was made of wood but sometimes of metal. The pole was the bar of the yoke that pressed down on the captives shoulders. In 10:27 and 14:25 Isaiah compares the liberation of Israel from Assyrian captivity to the breaking of a yoke and the lifting of a burden. The "day of Midian" is an allusion to Gideon's defeat of the Midianites in which victory comes from Yahweh (Judges 7:15-25).

2nd Reading - 1 Corinthians 1:10-13, 17

From the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 18:1-18) we know that the church of Corinth was founded by Saint Paul, with the help of Silas and Timothy, during his 2nd missionary journey. The apostle had arrived in Corinth from Athens, where he had made few converts. This relative failure in Athens, plus the moral corruption which reigned supreme in Corinth, may explain why he arrived "in much fear and trembling" (1 Corinthians 2:3). No doubt moved by the Holy Spirit, in this new city the apostle would leave aside the rhetoric of human wisdom and simply proclaim "nothing except Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2).

Saint Paul spent more than a year and a half teaching in Corinth – in the period A.D. 50-52 (Acts 18:11). To begin with he stayed and worked with Aquila and Priscilla, a Christian couple who had been expelled from Rome shortly before, because of Claudius'

edict against the Jews (Acts 18:2). As was his custom, he preached, to begin with, in the synagogue – to Jews and Greeks who believed in the God of Israel (Acts 18:4). Later, because of the opposition he was meeting from Jews, he decided to concentrate on preaching to the Gentiles. At that point he changed his lodgings and stayed with Titus Justus, a Gentile who was living close to the synagogue and who may very well have been a convert to Judaism (Acts 18:6-7).

Paul made many converts in Corinth – Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, being one of the most prominent (Acts 18:18) – but he had his share of setbacks as well. Once, our Lord appeared to him at night in a vision, to raise his spirits (Acts 18:9-10). Increasing opposition from Jews ultimately led to charges being brought against Paul to Gallio, the Roman proconsul; but Gallio gave the matter no importance because he saw it as a complicated Jewish religious squabble (Acts 18:12-17). There is documentary evidence – published in 1902 – in the form of an inscription found at Delphi recording that Gallio's term of office in Achaia began in July, A.D. 51. This allows us to date fairly precisely the Apostle's first stay in Corinth: he would have been brought for his appearance before Gallio in the early months of A.D. 52. He left Corinth shortly after this, taking ship with Aquila and Priscilla (Acts 18:18).

Approximately a year after this, there arrived in Corinth a man named Apollos, a very eloquent Jew of Alexandrian origin; he carried on the work Paul had begun (Acts 18:26-28; 1 Corinthians 3:4-6).

To judge from the information Saint Paul provides in his letters, the Christian community at Corinth was one of his largest foundations. Seemingly, Christians of pagan birth were in the majority (1 Corinthians 12:2), most of them were educated and even well-to-do (1 Corinthians 1:26-29); it was a community of some considerable size, with all walks of life represented (1 Corinthians 11:2-6; 14:34-35).

The perfect harmony that should have reigned among Christians because of their fellowship and unity in Christ has been shattered at Corinth. Chloe's messengers informed Paul of the factions in the community. After he had left Corinth, other missionaries and Jewish Christians representing different movements that were agitating the Church came to the city. Apollos had made a strong impression on the better educated minority of the Corinthian Christians. Jewish Christians originally from Palestine or Syria boasted of their attachment to Cephas (Peter) and won a following among their Corinthian colleagues. The majority of the faithful, poor freedmen and slaves, incited by the pretensions of the other factions, boasted of their attachment to Paul, the Apostle of Corinth. Was there a fourth faction, a Christ party? Or is the cry "I belong to Christ" Paul's personal protest against the factions in the community? Commentators show no agreement on these questions. Some see the Christ party as mystics who rejected all human teachers and claimed to be guided by revelations received directly from Christ through the charismatic gifts. Others think the Christ party were Judaizers who had known Christ during His earthly life and now challenged Paul's apostolic authority.

All this speculation aside, the basic idea which Paul teaches is that the Church is a

supernatural entity; it has been founded by Christ, Christ is the head, and it is Christ who governs it through His ministers.

¹⁰ I urge you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,

This appeal for unity is based on the Christian profession of faith.

that all of you agree in what you say,

“Agree in what you say” is a common Greek expression which does not refer to agreement in words only, but means “to be in perfect agreement.”

and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and in the same purpose.

Being “united” suggests a mutual adjustment and adaptation, a readiness to give in to one another in the interests of harmony. Christians must be united in their thinking and in the goal and direction of their lives.

“The visible Church is a mixed body, consisting of both righteous and unrighteous people. This is why Paul praises some of its members and criticizes others. The person who agrees with the right doctrine and the Church’s teaching concerning the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as well as with the dispensation concerning us, with resurrection and judgment, and who follows the rules of the Church is not in schism.” [Theodoret of Cyr (ca. A.D. 435), *Interpretation of the Fourteen Epistles of Paul*, 1 Corinthians 1,4]

¹¹ For it has been reported to me about you, my brothers, by Chloe’s people, that there are rivalries among you.

The disagreements have reached the point of recrimination and sharp language.

¹² I mean that each of you is saying, “I belong to Paul,” or “I belong to Apollos,” or “I belong to Kephas,” or “I belong to Christ.”

“Kephas” is a Greek transliteration of the Aramaic *Kepha* which means “rock”. He is referring to Peter (Matthew 16:18). There is no evidence that Peter had ever visited Corinth before this epistle was written.

“In reality the Corinthians called themselves after other teachers, but Paul uses his own name and that of Apollos and Peter in order to make his point. By adding the name of Christ to the rest, he showed them how ridiculous the whole conflict was.” [Theodoret of Cyr (ca. A.D. 435), *Interpretation of the Fourteen Epistles of Paul*, 1 Corinthians 3,5]

¹³ Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? ¹⁷ 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.

Factions founded on attachment to ministers of Christ involve a dogmatic absurdity. Paul indicates this with a biting sarcasm. There is only one Savior, Christ who died on the cross, into whom men are incorporated by baptism, no matter who administers it.

“Whenever Paul uses rhetorical questions, as he does here, he implies that the whole argument is absurd.” [Saint John Chrysostom (A.D. 392), *Homilies on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* 3,5]

Gospel - Matthew 4:12-23

In the interval between last week’s reading and the one we hear this week, Jesus has spent 40 days in the desert; at the end of which He is tempted by the Devil. Overcoming the temptations, He begins His public ministry.

12 When he heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee.

The complete account of the imprisonment of John the Baptist is given in Matthew 14:1-12. All the synoptic gospels and John agree that Jesus did not begin His own proclamation until John had been imprisoned by Herod Antipas. Jesus’ move to Galilee has been understood both as a courageous taking up of His mission and as a move to greater safety.

13 He left Nazareth and went to live in Capernaum by the sea, in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali¹⁴ that what had been said through Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled:

Capernaum is near the northern end of the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. Matthew notes that Capernaum lays in the old tribal territory of Zebulun and Naphtali. This allows him to cite our first reading. Isaiah’s promise of liberation Matthew sees fulfilled by Jesus’ arrival.

15 “Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the way to the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles, ¹⁶ the people who sit in darkness have seen a great light, on those dwelling in a land overshadowed by death light has arisen.” ¹⁷ From that time on, Jesus began to preach and say,

This inaugurates Jesus’ ministry.

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

The message of repentance was the theme of John the Baptist. It becomes the central message of Jesus and, along with the resurrection, the basis and object of Christian hope.

18 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;

Matthew anticipates Jesus' later renaming Simon as Peter (Greek: *Petros*, Aramaic: *Kepha*).

they were fishermen.

The Galilean fishing industry was quite prosperous and exported its products.

¹⁹ He said to them, "Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men."

"Come after me" is technical language of a teacher to disciples but Jesus goes beyond the normal learner - teacher relationship by taking the initiative. To become a disciple they must literally "come after" Him, walking behind Him in His footsteps. Gathering disciples is the closest Jesus comes to founding a Church before the crucifixion.

²⁰ At once they left their nets and followed him.

Jesus expected, and got, a radical and prompt obedience from His followers. Later traditions look at the nets as a symbol of worldly entanglements.

²¹ 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, ²² and immediately they left their boat and their father and followed him.

Note that followers of Jesus can sometimes mean rupturing family ties, yet Jesus opposes neglect of parents in their old age (Matthew 15:4-6). To be a follower means changing your life.

²³ 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.

A summary report of Jesus' ministry. The important item, "proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom", is in the middle – a literary device called a "sandwich."