

HOMILY FOR THE THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME-JANUARY 22, 2023

**READINGS: Isaiah 9:1-4;
Responsorial Psalm-Psalm 27;
1 Corinthians 1:10-13, 17-18;
Gospel 4:12-23**

Christian Unity: Living God's love revealed in the Bible.

We begin today's reflection with a couple of questions. When you hear the expression "children of God," what comes to mind? How would you explain the meaning of this expression? In Christianity, we refer to Jesus, our Lord and God as the Son of God the Father. We also refer to Jesus as the Son of Mary. About four weeks ago, we celebrated the birth of Jesus on Christmas Day. A couple of weeks ago, we also celebrated the Solemnity of the Epiphany of Jesus. On that day we learned that because Jesus came into the world, Christians are granted equal opportunity and equal rights with the Jewish people, God's chosen people. Today, our journey of faith brings us to the Third Sunday in Ordinary Time. Today, we also celebrate the "Sunday of the Word of God" or "Sunday of the Bible." As part of our celebration, the Church invites us to reflect on the three Biblical readings to deepen our understanding of the expression "children of God" in the Christian faith tradition.

We begin with the first reading from the Book of the prophet Isaiah. Today's passage is referred to as "The Righteous Reign of the Coming King." The passage is part of Isaiah's prophecy about the coming of a king and a messiah--in fact, we read this passage at Christmas Mass. The prophecy reads: "For a child has been born for us, a son given to us: authority rests on his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

Today's passage begins with these words: "There will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time, the Lord brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time, he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond Jordan, Galilee of the nations." Zebulun and Naphtali were tribes located in Northern Galilee. In the time of the prophet Isaiah, the Assyrians had conquered these two tribes. In today's passage the prophet spoke of the time when God would restore the lost tribes. The expression "Galilee of the nations" is not just about a geographical designation. The prophecy of the restoration of this land, the land beyond the Jordan, symbolizes a prophetic hope and promise of God. To the first hearers of today's passage, Isaiah's prophecy spoke of the ingathering of the exiled tribes of Israel. However, in using the expression "Galilee of the nations," the prophecy is seen as a broader prophetic hope.

Today's first reading forms the backdrop to the Gospel reading from Matthew. The passage begins with these words: "When Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the

Prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled.” Today’s passage is referred to as “The beginning of the Galilean ministry.” In mentioning the death of John the Baptist to begin today’s passage, the Evangelist Matthew draws our attention to the fact that Jesus began his ministry after the death of John the Baptist. We also notice that Matthew cited the passage from the first reading to teach that the ministry of Jesus was the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah. However, instead of using the expression “Galilee of the nations” from Isaiah’s prophecy, the Evangelist used the expression “Galilee of the Gentiles.” Scripture scholars teach that both Isaiah’s Hebrew word, *goyim* (for “Galilee of the nations”), and Matthew’s Greek word, *ethne*, (for “Galilee of the Gentiles”) were used to identify the people who were not a part of the kingdom of Israel. According to Matthew, Isaiah’s prophecy of the light rising upon Zebulun and Naphtali is fulfilled in Jesus’ residence at Capernaum, “by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali.”

At the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, Jesus took up the words of John the Baptist: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Matthew 3:2). This expression has a different meaning, because in his preaching of the kingdom, Jesus taught that the kingdom of heaven has already begun to be present. It is interesting to note that Jesus uses the expression “the kingdom of heaven” for “the kingdom of God,” an expression commonly used by the two other synoptic Gospels--Mark and Luke. The “kingdom of heaven” is one of the dominant themes in the Gospel of Matthew. The Evangelist Matthew was a devout Jew and he wrote to an audience who mostly had Jewish background. Because God is so holy, it was a custom among Jews to refrain from naming God. Matthew therefore avoided direct reference to God and he substituted the more indirect and respectful “kingdom of heaven” for “kingdom of God.” The “kingdom of heaven” and the “kingdom of God” are synonymous expressions.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, we recognize that the first reading and the Gospel reading are related to each other. In the first reading, Isaiah imagined that Zebulun and Naphtali would see a great light. In today’s Gospel reading the Evangelist used the ministry of Jesus in Zebulun and Naphtali to teach his audience that all nations had now seen a great light. According to Matthew, Jesus’ proclamation, “Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near” offers a new understanding of kingdom that is available to all nations.

Jesus established the kingdom of heaven by calling other people--disciples--to preach about the good news of the kingdom. The second part of today’s Gospel is the call of the first disciples. Biblical scholars teach that the first disciples came from the area described as the former region of Naphtali. The disciples Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John were fishermen from Naphtali. Through their witnessing to the Lord, more people were brought into the kingdom as believers in Jesus Christ. The early believers formed the beginning of the Church. Paul, one of the early followers, referred to as the “Apostle of the Gentiles,” taught that in Christ, Christians have become sons and daughters of God the Father. According to Paul, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts to enable us to call God our Father (Galatians 4:4-7). As children of God,

we have entered into a covenantal relationship of love with God. As children of God, the Bible teaches us that we are also brothers and sisters of Jesus who is not ashamed to call us his brothers and sisters (Hebrew 2:11).

My brothers and sisters in Christ, we have come together to celebrate the Eucharist. What do the three readings from the Bible teach us about the meaning of the expression “children of God?” On September 30, 2019-- the Memorial of St. Jerome, Bishop and Doctor of the Church-- Pope Francis established that “the Third Sunday in Ordinary Time is to be devoted to the celebration, study and dissemination of the Word of God.” Pope Francis urges all Christians to read the Bible. With proper interpretation, the Bible conveys a message of hope, peace and love. In fact, there are beautiful stories that parents can read to inspire their children, for example: The Calling of the Child Samuel (1 Samuel 3), The Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids (Matthew 25:1-13), Jesus Blesses Little Children (Mark 10: 13-16), The Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 25-37), Jesus Cleanses Ten Lepers (Luke 17:11-19) and The Wedding at Cana (John 2: 1-12).

This Sunday also falls during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. As Christians the celebration of the Sunday of the Word of God in the context of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity reminds us of Jesus’ teaching in the Bible that “they may be one, as we are one” (John 17:22-23). We celebrate that we are together as brothers and sisters, as children of God-- in faith, hope and love as revealed in the Bible. The call to Christians, the children of God to be one in Christ is what Paul talks about in his First Letter to the Corinthians. In the second reading Paul appealed to the early Christians that “there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose.”

So, how do we live to reflect who we are as children of God? Today’s readings encourage us to work toward peace and unity in the Christian Church. Today, let us be inspired by the actions of the first disciples in the Gospel reading and those of Paul to continue the ministry of Jesus. As God’s children and as brothers and sisters in Christ our Lord, we are encouraged to live by the teachings of God. Through our actions of love, healing, and caring, we support each other as brothers and sisters. As we come to receive the Eucharist, let us turn to Jesus to inspire us to live so that our lives may reflect the light of Christ shining in our community.

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