January 22, 2017

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Is 8:23—9:3
Ps 27:1, 4, 13-14
1 Cor 1:10-13, 17
MT 4:12-23 or Mt 4:12-17

by Mark Peters

700 years before the birth of Jesus, in a time of great national crisis, Israel and its leaders looked to political alliances and military defences to protect them from a much stronger foe who threatened their very existence as they knew it. Bitterly disappointed by King Ahaz’ willingness to trust in Yahweh alone, he writes of a future, ideal King.

Zebulun and Naphtali – later called Galilee – had been the first provinces of Israel to be overrun by the Assyrians, who exiled many Jews and turned it into a “district of Gentiles.” But now the prophet envisions them as “glorified,” having completely thrown off the yoke of submission to foreign powers and influences, and now celebrating.

This image is a prelude to Isaiah’s famous oracle, often heard in Advent, about an ideal King or Messiah, named “Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace,” who would rule with justice and bring about real peace. Some scholars believe the oracle was part of Jewish liturgy, specifically the accession rite of a new king. The hope at any royal accession would have been that the new king (proclaimed an adopted “son of God”) would be faithful to the Davidic covenant and restore Israel’s fortunes.

By the time of Jesus, Galilee was once again mainly Jewish, but surrounded by Gentile peoples and more open to foreign cultural influences, so suspect to many Jews. This north-eastern section of Israel was highly populated, more urbanized and multi-cultural, and therefore more open to new ideas – a place where the teaching and works of someone with only a few years to complete his mission might reach the most people most quickly. No wonder Jesus left Nazareth and moved to Capernaum at the start of his ministry!

He was not fearful of other cultures, nor condemning of those of different or no religions. Instead he dwelt among them, shared their “joys and hopes, and griefs and anxieties,” loved them and ministered to them, but also spoke hard truths about the need for repentance, transformation, mercy, forgiveness and nonviolence, ultimately dying for it and becoming the fulfilment of Isaiah’s prophecy – the Light who shines in the darkness.

So many of us in the US today have come to feel that we are dwelling in a land of gloom and walking in darkness. Whether it is because you’ve felt for years that our once-great nation has lost its way, or because you are afraid of the leader that we’ve elected to “make us
great again,” few of us are optimistic these days. And we almost have to laugh when we hear St. Paul urge us to have no divisions among us! What are we as a nation if not divided? Even many families half-dreaded the recent holidays for fear of political arguments spoiling the festivities.

Yet the Psalmist reminds us that:

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

And Paul tells us the secret to “finding agreement” with our fellow Christians, who are as bitterly divided these days as any other groups: being united in mind and purpose to the cross of Christ. Certainly that is the way to approach the things that divide us, by reflecting upon and asking each other what Christ’s cross and message mean, rather than focusing on the politician of the moment. We may not find common ground immediately, but at least we will be on more solid footing for a conversation than Democratic, Republican, or any other ideologies.

Whether or not we ever find unity of mind and purpose with all our brothers and sisters, we still have to focus our own minds and find our own purpose in Christ. Matthew’s Gospel suggests that the proper response to Christ’s invitation to follow him is to drop everything and just do it. Few of us can hear that and not feel judged and found wanting as Ahaz, but we can pray that with God’s grace we may follow “more nearly, day by day.”2 In the meantime, even in the midst of gloom and darkness, we can “wait for the LORD with courage; be stouthearted, and wait for the LORD.”

Mark Peters has been involved in justice and peace ministry in the Milwaukee area for 40 years and is currently Director of Justice, Peace and Reconciliation for the Priests of the Sacred Heart, based in Franklin, WI. The order’s founder, Fr. Leo Dehon, was an early advocate of democracy and labor rights and of Pope Leo XIII’s great social encyclical Rerum Novarum.

1 Gaudium et Spes
2 Godspell, “Day by Day”