

The Great Light

Homily for January 21-22, 2023

3rd Sunday Ordinary Time

A little boy named Bobby entered his first science fair in second grade. Because his mom has a green thumb, they decided to experiment with the growth of plants. He took two small green plants and placed one on a sunny windowsill and the other in a cardboard box. After a couple of weeks, Bobby checked on the two plants. The one on the windowsill had grown a couple of inches and had vibrant green leaves. The one in the box had grown a bit, but it had lost all its green color, becoming almost white and its leaves drooping. Thinking that the plant might die, Bobby cut a hole in one side of the box, and set the box, with the plant inside, by the windowsill ... with the hole facing toward the incoming light. Well, you know what happened ... but Bobby was so excited by this discovery! Yes, over the course of a few weeks, the plant began to grow out through the hole! And a couple of weeks later, it turned to grow up toward the light and even blossomed! The plant that had been in gloomy darkness ... and was all but dead ... had seen a great light, it turned toward that light and blossomed!

This story is illustrative of the theme on display in our readings for today. Isaiah speaks of a time when the people of Israel were, so to speak in a dark box, where they had no light. It was around the year 722 BC and the northern country called Israel, - the south was called Judah, made up of ten of the twelve tribes were brutally treated by the dominant world power, the Assyrians. The land was invaded, much like what Russia is doing in Ukraine today. People were killed, homes destroyed, families displaced, and a deep darkness was over the land. The first two of the tribes taken into exile and scattered among the nations were Zebulun and Naphtali. We can understand therefore that this was a land of deep darkness that was like the plant in the lightless box.

But the prophet goes on to speak of a time when a light will shine into that darkness. Enter our Gospel reading for today. St Matthew, he is the most Jewish of the four Gospels, is always quoting the Old Testament in showing how in Jesus all these Old Testament prophecies are fulfilled. Notice what Matthew does and says: At the very beginning of Jesus' public ministry, the evangelist tells us, the Lord establishes his home base in Capernaum, the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali. Then Matthew quotes directly from Isaiah 9:

*Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,
on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—
16 the people who sat in darkness
have seen a great light,
and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death
light has dawned.”¹*

¹ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#) (Mt 4:15–16). (1993). National Council of Churches of Christ.

Now because we are not first century Jews the application of this quote can be lost on us. But not for the Jews who first heard this story. It is at the very place where the 8th Century BC Exile happened among those two tribes that were taken from the land, Zebulun and Naphtali, that Jesus will initiate his public ministry. And notice what St. Matthew then states:

From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”²

Now remember what Isaiah said? To people walking in darkness a great light has dawned. What kind of light? It is the light of truth, the exact thing Jesus announces with his proclamation of repentance. Repentance has to do with a change of mind, with how we think and relate to the world in which we live because we are learning to see everything from the perspective of Jesus.

In this world there are always those influencers at work that would have us believe there is no light, it is all darkness. When this happens in our lives we have a tendency to be lost. Remember that I said the tribes were absorbed by the surrounding countries so that the people of God lost a sense of their true identity. How easily this can happen for us, especially with the virtual world that is always wanting our attention, is always wanting to take us into exile, away from the Lord and his light – placing us in the dark box.

But Jesus says, no there is another way. I don’t want you to live in captivity but rather in the place where my kingdom and the light I alone can provide is increasingly guiding and governing your life. That kingdom of light that is breaking through into the dark box of this world and inspiring and enabling you to grow and to thrive. And here is the thing Matthew wants us to understand. Jesus has this way of showing up in those places that are backward and unimportant to the world and the newsmakers. His kingdom is one that is not obvious to all and requires that our minds are open to the light of His truth and love. How would you say this is for you? Are you discovering what it is to see his Kingdom in the land of gloom and darkness?

For when we do, then something else happens, we discover that were are not captured by the culture and society in which we live, but rather are called to share in expanding Jesus kingdom of light. As we come to a deeper realization like Peter, Andrew, James and John, Jesus is calling you and me, we have a spiritual awakening that St Augustine expressed this way:

“If you have God you have everything, even if you don’t have anything else; and if you have everything else but you don’t have God, you have nothing at all

The Psalmist says something startling that echoes Augustine: “One thing I ask of the Lord.” He doesn’t ask for many things, just one thing. What is that? God himself.

After St. Thomas Aquinas finished the four thousand pages of his Summa theologiae, perhaps the greatest work of theology ever written, his confessor testified that he heard the voice of God speaking to Thomas from the crucifix saying: “You have written well of me, Thomas. What will

² [The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition](#) (Mt 4:17). (1993). National Council of Churches of Christ.

you have for your reward?” And Thomas answered, “Only yourself, Lord.” Of the thousands of pages and millions of words that St. Thomas said in his life, those three were the wisest.

“Only yourself Lord” when said with a desire to live them out will inspire us to respond to Jesus’ call so we can discover more fully who we are and whose we are. What is the result of such knowledge? An infusion of joy.

What is joy? It is a choice, just like love. We can either chase the feelings the world presents to us or choose the reality of living in the Light. Joy comes from the fact that you know that God is here and that you are known and loved by him. The Christian life is a pursuit of the One who loved us first, the One in whom we find our true joy.

To cultivate this life of joy requires that daily choice to spend time with the Lord. St Francis de Sales who lived through a very tumultuous time in Calvinist Geneva never lost sight of the Light of Jesus shining forth. The way he accessed that light was by being clear about the need to take a personal prayer time each day and to cultivate an attitude of prayerfulness throughout the day. He proposes a pattern for our day which will help us to “remember” the Lord at various points. Here are his suggestions:

As soon as we wake up turn to the Lord, thank Him for another day, dedicate it to Him and ask His help for living it in a way pleasing to Him.

Take time for personal prayer (including spiritual reading) as early in the morning as feasible.

Attend daily Mass as often as possible and visit the Church when you can.

Share in Eucharistic Adoration.

Withdraw into the cell of our souls periodically during the day to remember the Lord, to be aware of His presence and speak to Him. We can do this even in the midst of activities. Always remember to retire at various times into the solitude of your own heart even while outwardly engaged in discussions or transactions with others.

As we do this we will be praying with the psalmist, St Thomas and St Augustine, “Only you Lord.” And when this happens then the light like that which touched the plant in the box will enable us to grow and blossom for in the darkness we are directed towards the great light, Jesus Christ our Lord.