

EPIPHANY III January 26, 2020 St. Alban's Church Staten Island

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Let's take a look at *the setting* for today's Gospel passage. After John the Baptist's arrest, the crowds he had commanded dwindled. So, after being tempted by the devil in the wilderness, Jesus assumed the message of John but developed it in a different way. He went back to Galilee, to make a new home in Capernaum on the shores of the lake. Capernaum is located in an area called *Zebulun* and *Naphtali*; these were Canaanite lands allocated by God to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, shown to Moses, and assigned by Joshua; they represented the Covenantal relationship between the Jews and Yahweh and were regarded as having a kind of sacramental character.

Here in this one area of the region of Capernaum, Jesus will call his first disciples, preach the Sermon on the Mount, and begin his ministry of healing and teaching. In so doing, the author tells us, he was fulfilling the promise of Isaiah: "the people who live in the dark...will see a bright light." Which is another way of saying that "Jesus' return to Galilee (was) filled with meaning." In Matthew's account, it is not Jesus who is identified as the light of the world but his followers who will bear that light to the world through their own collective way of life (you will recall Jesus' later message: 'Let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.')

Matthew is here telling us about the third time that Jesus had moved to a new place (from Bethlehem to the sojourn in Egypt, and from there to Nazareth --- and finally, from Nazareth to Capernaum in Galilee). And, in part, the message is that he will lead a "peripatetic existence" as "an itinerant preacher and constant wanderer." The trip to Galilee was not insignificant. It was 80 miles away from Nazareth at a time when travel by foot over problematic terrain was very limiting. But, in fact, he was leaving one backwater town for another equally undistinguished location on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee, a large fresh-water lake. But in the mind of Jesus, there are no unimportant places, because the whole world needs to hear his message. And, of course, this journey signals his intention to demonstrate that he is not tied to a particular landscape.

The western shore of the lake was Jewish territory, while the eastern shore was Gentile and pagan. Nevertheless, in this small area (the lake is only 8 miles across at its greatest width),

there would have been a good deal of interaction between these communities, and from the beginning Jesus made a point of his friendliness toward the Gentile community which created some hard feelings among his followers who were traditional Jews. This area also lay in the path of the *Via Maris*, an international trade route connecting Egypt with Syria on the western shore of the lake, making the area more cosmopolitan than it might otherwise have been.

Though Jesus, in traveling to Galilee, may have seemed to be making a strategic retreat, in fact it was more “a journey into the lion’s den,” because Herod Antipas ruled there, a man notorious for his “brutality and...intolerance” for any who challenged his claim to power. And John the Baptist had already been executed for doing precisely that.

But once arrived there, Jesus began preaching a message of repentance. However, repentance did not mean what you and I normally think of: feeling bad about ourselves and asking for forgiveness. No, Jesus was talking about *simply turning around and going in the opposite direction*. And what he meant by that for the people of Israel was that they needed to abandon their destructive approach to their foreign overlords, the Romans.

They continued to seek independence and freedom through the old, standard way of military resistance, and they were seeking a Messiah who would be the king of the troops. But this was a pointless, counter-productive way of proceeding. It was darkness fighting darkness. Jesus was teaching them to fight darkness with light. Instead of rushing over the cliff in their endless attempts at violent overthrow of the invading force, they needed to go in the opposite direction, that of peace, love and forgiveness. And that was a very hard sell.

But Jesus had also chosen his audience with care. “As a Jew in Roman-controlled territory, Jesus locate(d) himself among the marginal, with the poor, not the wealthy, with the rural peasants, not the urban elite, with those who resist(ed) imperial commands, not those who enforce(d) them.”

Here he continued a pattern of preferring the company of the seemingly unimportant, the small and insignificant places and people as the focus of his ministry. And notice that for his first disciples he chooses fishermen. These were poor workers of low status. They were viewed as being on a par with money lenders and thieves. These were people who led a

precarious, economically marginal existence under Roman control. And, again, Jesus made a decision to work with the vulnerable people of his time and place.

And a good deal of his popularity came from his role as a healer. His reputation always preceded his arrival in a new place. And the need was great. The numbers of those suffering from diseases, afflictions and infirmities would strike us as remarkable.

But this was Roman Palestine in the first century. “Roman imperial structures and practices were bad for people’s health. Some 70-90 percent of the people in Rome’s empire experienced varying degrees of poverty. In addition, hygiene was ill-understood, water quality poor, food insecurity rife, and the social stresses high.” This resulted in the widespread incidence of disease, not only the kind associated with poor nutrition but also those communicated rapidly in an un-hygienic environment and those passed down from one generation to the next without hope of medical intervention. The healing acts of Jesus demonstrated an effort to “repair imperial damage and enact God’s life-giving empire in restoring people’s useful lives.”

Since commercial fishing was controlled by the government and the official collectors who signed contracts with the Romans to extract the revenue (with tolls as high as 40%), those who fished for a living were exploited, and the kinds of lives they could lead were extremely limited. But the point is that in calling Peter and Andrew and James and John away from their occupation, their families, and their social networks, he was also calling them away from their lives of exploitation at the hands of the foreign overlords. This was a “break” with the “powers that be.” Jesus called them “into a new power, the reign of heaven.”

He was creating an alternative community of disciples who would lead the kinds of lives he was advocating for them. Jesus was asserting the sovereignty of God over that of their exploiters and dominators. He was offering a whole new way of life based on justice and peace. And he was choosing to work with “utterly ordinary individuals.” Nevertheless, these simple folk were being “called to an extraordinary task.”

The full story of their record of loyalty is very mixed. They frequently failed to understand or obey him. They would sleep through his agony in the garden of Gethsemane, flee when he was arrested, and deny any knowledge of him when challenged by the authorities.

On the other hand, Jesus did not give up on them even when they seemed to be running in the opposite direction. He would call them to repent (that is, to turn around and return). Even when they failed, they were called once again to follow him. And some of the stories of their bravery in the face of persecution in the wake of the crucifixion and in support of the emerging church are truly awe-inspiring. In this way, God was revealing his triumph over the forces of evil and death which were threatening the very survival of his people. There is no better example than St. Paul whose critically important conversion was celebrated officially yesterday, a conversion which would precede a grisly death (like that reserved for Peter) at the hands of the Romans in the mid-60s of the first century.

Yet the church grew and prospered in spite of, and perhaps because of, sacrifices like that of Peter and Paul in Rome under the Emperor Nero. These simple folks had indeed been called to an extraordinary task.

Give us grace, O Lord, to answer readily the call of our Savior Jesus Christ and proclaim to all people the Good News of his salvation, that we and the whole world may perceive the glory of his marvelous works; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen

Sources

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