SUNDAY AFTER THEOPHANY St Matt 4: 13-17

Almost two weeks ago we heard the Gospel reading about the circumcision of Christ. The account is very short and factual; in fact, only one verse in which we are told that he was circumcised on the eighth day and given the name Jesus according to the instructions of the angel. The second part of that reading gives us a much more personal insight into the life of the Holy Family. At the age of twelve Jesus and his family along with other travellers go up to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. At the end he stays behind and his parents cannot find him in the group. Imagine what his parents, like any mother and father, are feeling and indeed fearing. They find him in the temple listening to and arguing with the teachers; his mother reprimands him for causing such anxiety to his parents. Jesus calmly and mystifyingly responds that she should have expected him to be in his Father’s house.

In today’s short reading we read “The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, toward the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles – 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”. Zebulun and Naphtali are two of the twelve sons of Jacob by different mothers who are blessed by him on his death bed in the Old Testament book of Genesis chapter 49. and Zebulun is told that he and his descendants shall dwell at the shore of the sea; he shall become a haven for ships and his border shall be at Sidon (modern Lebanon). Naphtali is in eastern Galilee to the west of the sea of Galilee. The quotation comes from the prophet Isaiah chapter 9 and emphasises that the gloom and anguish of these two nations will be turned into glory. They were looked down on by the other tribes in Israel and were on the northern borders of Israel and so the first to suffer in any foreign invasion, for example by the Assyrians. This is the region of north Galilee where there are many foreigners, non-Jews or Gentiles, where Jesus settles in Nazareth with his family and from there begins his ministry. Light comes to these areas in the form of Jesus and the Holy Family.

As a precursor to the ministry of the Lord we encounter the character of his cousin John the Baptist who is baptising people in the Jordan after they have heard his call to repent and bear fruit that befits repentance. He is a formidable ascetic character who is not frightened to call upon the Pharisees and even King Herod to repent in the latter’s case for committing adultery with his brother’s wife. He is subsequently arrested and put in prison and the Lord takes up his mantle and not only preaches repentance but announces the presence of the Kingdom of Heaven accompanied with “healing every disease and every infirmity among the people” to quote the text.

In the verses quoted we see two contrasting images of darkness and light and of death and life. Light and life to which we are called is preceded by repentance.

We are reminded constantly of the importance of repentance in the Divine Liturgy when we pray that we may spend the rest of our lives in peace and repentance in the litanies after the Great Entrance and before we receive Christ in communion. We may have a negative idea about the act of repenting but the Greek word ‘metanoia’ meaning change of mind is much better at putting a positive spin on the process. We change the direction in an area or areas of our lives which deliver us from a state or stage in which we have become enmeshed or trapped and from which we need to be freed and move on.

It is obvious that we would like to spend the rest of our lives in peace but it may seem strange at first that we pray for a lifetime of repentance. To start to understand what this means we need to divest the word of its total identification with saying sorry or asking forgiveness, though certainly that is part of the process. More excitingly, the word has more to do with the process of turning and focusing our spiritual attention and effort increasingly on God and trying to become like his Son. This work under the light of Christ opens up deeper parts within us and offers us an increasing understanding of who we really are and how we can draw closer to Christ in the freedom and joy which changing our minds or our ideas, as the French phrase ‘changer les idées’ gives us. This experience also allows us to love not hate ourselves as we discover the treasures within like the great monastics, not selfishly or arrogantly, but objectively and to see these treasures in others. Then we can begin to understand it as the occupation or preoccupation of a lifetime. “Enter eagerly into the treasure house that is within you and so you will see the things that are in heaven,” writes St Isaac the Syrian.

As a priest especially one who blesses houses at this time of year it is a constant joy to read of Christ’s visit to the house of Zacchaeus in St Luke chapter 19 before the actual sprinkling of water takes place. The Lord takes the initiative with Zacchaeus in calling him down from the sycamore tree and inviting himself to dinner at his house, although it is written in the account that Zacchaeus was trying to see who Jesus was. A happy coincidence of thirst in the heart of one man receives a rapid response from God and salvation comes to the house of a very rich man, who shows his deep repentance by handing over far more than he has dishonestly extorted from others. “Today salvation has come to this house”, Christ announces joyfully and leaves us with a wonderful sense of joy, freedom, light and life in the heart of the tax collector and ours too. St Paul calls ‘joy’ the second of the spiritual gifts after ‘love’. Repentance brings joy. This experience is encountered often in confession. Christ often brings to the heart and mind of the person confessing sins from the past committed many, many years ago in the process of purging the soul. This is the lifelong process of repentance which many of us have experienced.

In the spiritual life duty and unfeeling obedience to rules by themselves cannot inspire us to love Christ more though they do provide a framework of discipline to help us on our journey. It is the light of Christ which overcomes the darkness within us and leads us to repentance and freedom; it is the light of Christ which enables us to see the love of God in a way we had never seen before and it is the light of Christ which lifts us above our human weaknesses to hope in Him.

Today we read about Christ moving his home to proclaim the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven by bringing light to those who sit in darkness. As we move into a new year let us rejoice in the coming of that light to us and pray that we may be further illumined by his presence.

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