**SUNDAY AFTER THEOPHANY - Matthew 4: 12-17**

This week we should have celebrated in church the Feast of the Theophany with the Blessing of the Waters. It is a most joyful feast particularly for children who love to see the priest sprinkling water throughout the corners of the church and over all and sundry who are present. Perhaps the most striking scene is in Ethiopia where after the prayers by the priest the young hurl themselves into the waters below like those who divebomb into a swimming pool. We often hear the word ‘joy’ or ‘joyful’ applied to the feast and this period in the Church’s life. We first hear it used of the Magi on the reappearance of the star which they had followed after their visit to Herod. The text in Greek says that “they rejoiced with very great joy”. The quality or rather the possession of joy is listed by St Paul in his epistle to the Galatians as the second in the hierarchy of Gifts of the Spirit after love.

The word ‘theophany’ in Greek can be translated as ‘the appearance or manifestation of God’ and of course this is what we have lived through liturgically during recent days, firstly with the birth of Christ in Bethlehem and now with his baptism by John in the River Jordan. Then we are told that he assumes the mantle of John after his arrest and continues to preach repentance and the coming of the Kingdom. Today’s short gospel reading quotes the prophet Isaiah: “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”. So here we have the appearance of God, not in Jerusalem or Judah but in the most northerly parts of Israel which are closer to Damascus and Samaria than to the Holy City itself. This area is also referred to as ‘Galilee of the Gentiles’. We know that the Lord did not send his apostles on their first mission to the Gentiles but to ‘the lost sheep of the House of Israel’. However, it was not long till Gentiles came knocking at his door and as he says ‘taking the Kingdom of heaven by storm’. There are some wonderful characters in this category who refuse to accept ‘no’ as an answer and earn the Lord’s approval. He will spend much more time in these remote areas named after children of Jacob (or Israel as he is renamed), the first by Leah, his first wife, and the second by Rachel’s maidservant.

We read later in this chapter that he went about these parts “preaching and healing every disease and every infirmity among the people’. We are also told that people were astonished by his teaching since he taught like no other, not like the scribes and Pharisees. It is not difficult to imagine the light of understanding that was conveyed to his audience and the joy that his miracles and words inspired since he was soon surrounded by thousands. How many of us would love to have been amongst them to see and listen to him!

But this experience of joy and wonder is for us today, his ‘sinful but trusting servants’ as we follow Christ in our readings in the period after Theophany. We shall follow him through the northern towns of Capernaum, Nain, Bethsaida and Chorazin and witness the compassion and joy which he will bring to simple people like you and me.

So, let us pray that the great light and joy which he brought to the people in darkness will be given to us too as we look courageously through the dark clouds, both literally and psychologically, of these days to our Saviour and cry like the psalmist to God “Set aright my footsteps in thy paths that my steps may not waver”.

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