

Homily (notes) from Canon Philip Dyson
22nd January 2023 - 3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Readings (Year A): 1st: Isaiah 8:23-9:3. 2nd: 1 Corinthians 1:10-13,17. **Gospel:** Matthew 4:12-23

None of us can be unmoved by the dreadful war going on in Ukraine. The merciless bombing and killing that we all see on our screens from the Russian aggressor. And with that war going on we hear virtually nothing of situations elsewhere in the world where there is war and violence. Add to that so much unrest here at home and across the world.

As ever the word of God has something to say to us. Today's readings focus on those vulnerable northern territories of Israel – the lands of Zebulun and Naphtali, two of the twelve tribes of Israel.

In Isaiah's time they were the first two tribes to be crushed by the invading Assyrians. Then the people were subjected to the darkness of war, oppression, violence; ruled by a foreign power that worshipped false gods. But Isaiah prophecies that God will confer glory on these suffering lands.

A great light will shine on them, and there will be a time of unbounded joy, because the warfare, the death and defeats will be ended.

It is with this prophecy Matthew opens his account of the public ministry of Jesus, thereby revealing his understanding of what Jesus is sent to do.

Jesus appears in Capernaum as a great light in time of darkness, to fulfil the Lord's ancient promise to liberate his people from all oppression and not simply oppression by foreign powers.

He brings freedom from humanity's oldest enemy- sin- and the death to which it leads. Jesus' message is 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is close at hand.' In Jesus the Lord is drawing close to be with his people and will act to set his people free. Jesus comes seeking a response, asking people to turn back to God.

So, he approaches Peter, Andrew, James and John, the first of the twelve, the first of the new Israel, and invites them to work with him in establishing God's kingdom – in a sense, to make the borders of God's kingdom secure.

Jesus calls them to follow him around Galilee as he goes on the offensive, undoing the work of the oppressor, the Evil One, by curing people of their illnesses and proclaiming the Good News of the nearness of God. Through Jesus' words and actions, the light of God shines in the darkness of people's lives, as today's Psalm proclaims.

A war within the heart of the new Christian community is addressed by Paul in the 2nd reading. Peace and Unity, a prayer prayed at every Mass, but these weeks of January a major focus, following Peace Sunday and the Octave of Prayer for Unity at the moment.

We today, like the people of Zebulun and Naphtali, can experience our lives as vulnerable and insecure in all kinds of ways – physically, emotionally, or spiritually. People know darkness in their lives in many forms – the victims of warfare, of violence on the streets or in the home; of religious, sexual, or racial prejudice, the oppression of extreme poverty of injustice; the burden of loneliness and a life without love; the pain of losing one's home, or health or spouse; the sense that God is distant or that life is meaningless. The weight of guilt or inability to forgive, the simple attraction of sin or addiction of any kind. All are modern forms of living under the rod of oppression, in a land of deep shadow.

Today's readings challenge us to believe that the Lord is still working to set his people free, and it invites us to respond -to hear him calling us by name, asking us to share in his work of proclaiming the Gospel and working to build up his kingdom. We are invited to let the light of the Lord shine through our lives – through our words and actions, so that others may share in the joy of knowing the nearness of God and the security of God's love.