

THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME – YEAR A

HOW LONG WILL THE NIGHT LAST?

Introduction

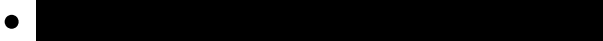
“*Judas, taking the morsel, went out immediately. And it was night*” (Jn 13:30). A few words to describe a dramatic scene: a man, now at the mercy of his crazy plans, abandons Christ—the light—and is swallowed by darkness. A human being fears the darkness of the night and is heartened when he sees the first signs of dawn. Sentries scan the horizon, waiting for the dawn (Ps 130:6). Long are the nights of those who burn with fever, are troubled by nightmares, and toss and turn until the morning (Jn 7:3-4).



Those who prowl in the darkness of vice, falsehood, and injustice also wait for the ray of light. Those who announce the end of a painful night and the beginning of a new day are waiting for that ray of light, too.

“*Watchman, how much of the night remains?*” the prophet asks (Is 21:11). How much longer will the darkness of evil and sin be in the world? When will the people be freed from the power of darkness? (Col 1:13).

Paul invites us to hope. “*This is the time to awake, for our salvation is now nearer than when we first believed; the night is almost over, and the day is at hand*” (Rom 13:11-12). The light/darkness conflict continues, waiting for the endless day, when “*there will be no more night. They will not need the light of lamp or sun for God himself will be the light and they will reign forever*” (Rev 22:5).



“We were darkness but now we are light.

Make us, O Lord, behave as children of the light.”

=====

First Reading: Isaiah 8:23b–9:3

First the Lord degraded the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali; but in the end he has glorified the seaward road, the land west of the Jordan, the District of the Gentiles.

Anguish has taken wing, dispelled is darkness: for there is no gloom where but now there was distress. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom a light has shone. You have brought them abundant joy and great rejoicing, as they rejoice before you as at the harvest, as people make merry when dividing spoils. For the yoke that burdened them, the pole on their shoulder, and the rod of their taskmaster you have smashed, as on the day of Midian.

Except for the first verse, we have already heard this reading at Mass on Christmas Eve. For a complete understanding of the text, you can refer to the explanation that is given there. The prophecy is historically set in the second half of the eighth century B.C. It was the era of the great Assyrian expansion in the Middle East. Even the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali, situated in northern Israel, were involved in these military-political upheavals. Devastation, violence, deportation, the imposition of heavy taxes were the consequences of the invasion of armies from Mesopotamia. Isaiah presents the dramatic situation as humiliation, permitted by the Lord to triumph over darkness.

In the region of Galilee, it was as if the chaos that reigned before the creation when “*darkness covered the abyss*” (Gen 1:2) had returned. The fertile lands beyond the Jordan seemed shrouded in the darkness of a night without end. Everywhere death reigned unchallenged. The depressed people had lost all hope. They were resigned to seeing the glorious ‘Way of the sea’ passing through Palestine to connect Egypt to Mesopotamia and permanently guarded by arrogant Assyrian soldiers.

At this time of general destruction, the voice of the prophet who announces the dawn of a new day resounds: “*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. On those who live in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned*” (9:1). It is the promise of a reversal of the situation. With his forward-looking gaze, Isaiah sees the Assyrian armies, responsible for the national disaster, withdraw and Israel resume its life in joy and peace.

The light referred to by the prophet was undoubtedly a new king, a descendant of David's

family. He was destined to carry out a mission to dispel the darkness introduced by the foreign invaders. Probably he was thinking of Hezekiah, the child in whom he had placed so much hope.

What happened historically? Nothing. The Assyrians continued to occupy the lands of Zebulun and Naphtali for another 100 years. Hezekiah, who tried to escape their yoke, 'was kept in Jerusalem like a bird in a cage' as stated in an inscription of Sennacherib found in Nineveh. And then? Was the prophet deceived? The historical perspective that we have is narrow and limited. If we do not see our plans materializing immediately, we think that God has forgotten us. He fulfills his promises, but in an unexpected way and in God's due time.

If the people's dreams of Isaiah's time were met, other oppressors would have succeeded the Assyrians because it is the logic of the world. The loser is eliminated, and the winner must immediately confront other claimants. God does not enter into this conflict. He looks from the top and firmly holds the situation in hand. He has a plan that radically disrupts the repetitive and inconclusive logic of the power struggle. The prophecy is realized, according to the logic of God, 750 years later.

When Jesus showed up on the shores of the lake, the kingdom of the Assyrians had already collapsed hundreds of years previously, but the darkness of the world had not been dissolved. It was the darkness of evil, violence, oppression, corruption, and selfishness. This darkness began to dissipate—as Matthew will say in today's Gospel—only when, with the beginning of the public life of Jesus, a light has shone on the mountains of Galilee.

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 1:10-13,17

I urge you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree in what you say, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and in the same purpose. For it has been reported to me about you, my brothers and sisters, by Chloe's people, that there are rivalries among you. I mean that each of you is saying, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ." Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with the wisdom of human eloquence, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its meaning.

When he wrote the first letter to the Corinthians, Paul was in Ephesus, the political and religious capital of the Roman province of Asia, the meeting place between the cultures of East and West, the home of famous masters and craftsmen. There, sailors, soldiers, and traders from all over the world met. One day some members of the family of Chloe (v. 11) from Corinth

came into this city. They delivered a letter to Paul sent by the Christians of that city.

Before reading it, the apostle wanted to know about that church. His hesitant guests—not knowing whether to tell or not to tell—ended up spilling everything they knew. In Corinth, the life of the community was painful. There were scandalous quarrels, and divisions arose, appealing to the name of an apostle (some boasted of belonging to Peter, others to Apollo, others to Paul). It would be better to draw a merciful veil over their behavior. There was debauchery that even the Gentiles would be ashamed of. In their Eucharistic celebrations, each group isolated itself and disregarded the others. There was no need to mention envy, criticism and grumbling. In short, Chloe's people—as they say—just emptied the bag. Disappointed and worried, Paul listened in silence. For a moment, he was perhaps thinking about the failure of his entire evangelizing mission, but then he recovered and decided to write to the Christians of Corinth. So the letter, proposed to us this Sunday, was written.

The first argument Paul confronts is disagreement, conflict, and division in the community. The passage is taken up in today's reading. *“Is Christ divided? Has Paul been crucified for you? Have you been baptized in the name of Paul?”* (v. 13). They are harsh words that reveal the gravity of the situation.

Paul makes it clear: the apostles are not the masters but servants; they are not the saviors; there is only one Savior, Christ. What caused such discord was—then as now—selfishness, the desire to dominate others, to prevail among others, and to impose on others. The light of the Gospel—lit by Paul—had shone in Corinth, but the obscurity of sin and the darkness of death were still dense and hard to dissolve.

Gospel: Matthew 4:12-23

When Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and went to live in Capernaum by the sea, in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali, that what had been said through Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled: *Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the way to the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles, the people who sit in darkness have seen a great light, on those dwelling in a land overshadowed by death light has arisen.* From that time on, Jesus began to preach and say, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

As he was walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon who is called Peter, and his brother Andrew, casting a net into the sea; they were fishermen. He said to them, “Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men.” At once they left their nets and followed him. He walked along from there and saw two other brothers, James, the son of Zebedee, and his brother John. They were in a boat, with their father Zebedee, mending their nets. He called them, and immediately they left their boat and their father and followed him. He went around all of

Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and curing every disease and illness among the people.

Today's Gospel is made up of three parts. First of all, with a quotation from the prophet Isaiah, Jesus' activity in Galilee is introduced (vv. 12-17). Then there is the vocation story of the first four disciples (vv. 18-22). Finally, the activity of Jesus is summed up in one sentence (v. 23). After the conclusion of John the Baptist's mission, Jesus moved from Nazareth to Capernaum. It became the center of his activities for nearly three years.

Capernaum was a village of fishing people and farmers that stretched for about 300 meters along the western shore of Lake Gennesaret. It was not renowned like the city of Tiberias—where the Tetrarch Herod Antipas lived—or like the prosperous Magdala, famous for its flourishing salted fish and dyeing industries. However, it enjoyed a certain prestige: along the 'Way of the Sea'—the famous imperial road. It started from Egypt and, passing through Damascus, led to Mesopotamia. It marked the border between Galilee and the Golan, which belonged to Philip (another son of Herod the Great). It was a border area with a customs office where duty on all merchandise was collected.

Matthew does not merely record Jesus' change of residence. He complements the information regarding a text of the Bible. To understand its meaning, it must be noted that Galilee was inhabited by Israelites regarded by all as semi-pagans because they were born from the intermingling of different peoples. The Jews of Jerusalem despised them because they were considered poorly educated, ignorant of the law, corrupt in customs, and less observant of the rabbinic provisions. They were also suspicious because of their subversive tendencies in the political arena (Galileans initiated the Zealot movement, responsible for the bloody revolts against the Roman Empire).

In this region at the edge of the holy land, in this "*Galilee of the Gentiles*" (v. 15), Jesus begins his mission and, with this choice, indicates who are the first recipients of his light, not the pure Jews, but the excluded, the distant.

Admiring the faith of the centurion—chief of the detachment of Roman soldiers living in Capernaum—he will one day exclaim "*I tell you I have not found such faith in Israel. I say to you, many will come from the east and west and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob at the feast in the kingdom of heaven; but their heirs of the kingdom will be thrown out*" (Mt 8:10-11). Even the chief priests and elders will notice the surprising reversal: "*The publicans and the prostitutes are ahead of you in the kingdom of heaven*" (Mt 21:31).

The change of residence—a trivial fact—has been included by Matthew for its theological significance, as the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy: "*The people who lived in darkness have seen a great light: on those who live in the land of the shadow of death a light has shone*" (v.

16). With the start of Jesus' public life, the dawn of a new day shone among the mountains of Galilee. The light spoken by the prophet has risen. The last verse of this first part presents the proclamation of Jesus: "*Repent because the kingdom of heaven is at hand*" (v. 17).

Converting oneself is not equivalent to 'becoming a little better, praying better, doing more good work' but 'radically change the way of thinking and acting.' Those who have cultivated projects of death must open themselves to the choices of life. Those who moved in darkness must turn towards the light. Only if they are willing to accept this change can one enter into the kingdom of heaven (not in paradise, but in the new condition of those who choose to risk their lives on the Word of Christ).

In the second part of the passage, the calling of the first four disciples is narrated. It is not the account of the call of the first apostles (the four evangelists narrate the fact so diversely from each other). It is a piece of catechesis that wants the disciple to understand what it means to say 'yes' to Christ's invitation to follow him. It is an example, an illustration of what it means to be converted.

The insistence on the verbs of movement must be noted. Jesus does not stop for a moment: "*As Jesus walked by the lake of Galilee ... and then he went on from there ... He went around all Galilee*" (vv. 18,21,23). Who is called must realize that he will not be granted any rest, and there will not be any stop along the way. Jesus wants to be followed day and night and throughout life. There are no moments of exemption from commitments taken.

The answer then must be prompt and generous as that of Peter, Andrew, James, and John, who "*immediately ... left their nets, the boat and their father and followed him*" (vv. 20,22).

The abandonment of your father should not be misunderstood. It does not mean that anyone who becomes a Christian (or chooses the religious and consecrated life) must ignore their parents. Among the Jewish people, the father symbolized the link with the ancestors and of attachment to tradition. This dependence on the past must be broken when it constitutes an impediment to welcoming the novelty of the Gospel. The history, the traditions, the culture of every people must be respected and valued. However, we know that not all the habits, customs, and ways of life handed down are compatible with the message of Christ.

The demand of Jesus relates to the dramatic choice that the early Christians were called to make. In choosing to become a disciple, they were rejected by their family, misunderstood by parents, expelled from the synagogues, and excluded from their people. Even today, this may represent the inescapable alternative for some between the love of 'the father' and the choice of Christ. Just think of what it takes for a Muslim, a Jew, a pagan, or a Buddhist to adhere to Christianity.

However, leaving the father implies the abandonment of everything incompatible with the Gospel. To the invitation to follow him, Jesus adds the charge: "*I will make you fish for*

people” (v. 19). The image is taken from the work done by the first apostles. They were not line fishing, but with a net and their job was to pull out of the sea (so the Lake of Galilee is incorrectly called) the fish.

In biblical symbolism, the sea was the abode of the devil, of diseases and everything that opposed life. It was deep, dark, dangerous, mysterious, and terrible. The monsters lived in the sea, and in it, even the most skilled sailors did not feel safe.

Fishing for people means getting them out of the condition of death where they are. It means to pull them away from the forces of evil that, like the raging waters, dominate, engulf and overwhelm them.

The disciple of Christ does not fear the waves and courageously faces them, even when they are raging. He does not give up hope to save a brother or a sister, even when she or he is in a humanly desperate situation: a slave to drugs or alcohol, unbridled passion, irritable, aggressive, and intractable behavior. In whatever situation we are in, we will be saved by the disciple of Christ.

The third part (v. 23) sums up in three words what Jesus does in favor of people: teaching, he is, therefore, light to every person; preaching the Good News, that is, announcing a word of hope to all, ensuring that the love of God is stronger than human evil; and curing the sick. He does not limit himself to proclaiming salvation but realizes it through concrete action, showing the disciples what they are called to do. Through the proclamation of the Gospel, they must create a new people, a new society, and a new world.

READ: Jesus begins his ministry and faces powerful opposition. He calls his followers, and they respond. His work starts in the north, in Galilee, a region considered inferior by the Jesus of the time.

REFLECT: Followers of Jesus move from darkness to light. People who like to live in the darkness will oppose anyone who wants to help them into the light. Jesus seeks out his followers, who in turn will teach and heal and drive out evil forces.

PRAY: As a follower of Jesus, I need to pray for guidance in continuing the mission of Jesus. Teaching and serving others is the prerogative of all the baptized.

ACT: Live your life as an example for others to see. Enlist your personal actions in the effort to drive out the evil of injustice.

Fernando Armellini