

JANUARY 27 ~ THIRD SUNDAY OF EPIPHANY

*READINGS: MATTHEW 4:12-23; 1 CORINTHIANS 1:10-18 ISAIAH 9:1-4;
PSALM 27:1,4-9*

SERMON A

The paradoxical nature of family unity is reflected in the passage we've just read from Isaiah. These verses speak of the people of the lands of Zebulun and Naphtali, who had been living in darkness, seeing a great light, who had been living in a land of shadows, having light shine on them.

Zebulun and Naphtali were sons of the same father, Jacob. However, they came from what we might call a 'non-nuclear' family. Naphtali's mother was Billah, who was the servant girl of Jacob's favoured wife, Rachel. Zebulun's mother was Leah, Jacob's first wife whom he was deceived into marrying. You can only imagine what kind of family tensions must have been at work here – each a son of a different mother, each seeing that their own mother was not their father's favourite. Yet together, Naphtali and Zebulun were to 'see a great light'.

Zebulun and Naphtali refer to one of the most extreme examples possible of a dysfunctional family. But, as our reading tells us, they will 'see a great light', 'light will shine on them'. For us, that 'great light' is Jesus, the Light of the world, a powerful reminder that Jesus can and does shine his light into the darkest and most difficult of family struggles and divisions – let's keep our eyes fixed on him. For us, the light that will shine on them is Jesus who calls us to be channels of his peace, shining the healing light of his love and forgiveness into the shadows of family tensions and conflict – let's do as he asks.

SERMON B

In our reading from Matthew, we are told that John is in prison. With this news Jesus returns to Galilee, again with the obligatory Old Testament passage illuminating the way. Although Jesus, the light to the world, will first preach to Israel, it is perhaps significant that Capernaum had a population that was about 50 per cent Gentile.

The phrase from our Matthew reading, ‘from that time on’, traditionally marks the beginning of the second section of this Gospel. We immediately see two sets of brothers called by Jesus, who abruptly, dramatically and positively decide to follow him. Such is the magnetism of his presence and personality. Simply to see him and hear his call is enough.

Today, Jesus’ call to some of us comes slowly, starting like a faint murmur and growing until we can no longer ignore it; while his call to others of us will be as sudden and dramatic as his call to Peter and Andrew, James and John. But however his call comes to us, we’ll know, for Jesus has a way of getting through to us; and ‘whatever nets we’re mending or fish we are catching’, we will respond as positively and as decisively as those first disciples and follow him, not knowing where it’s all going to lead. His magnetism is as powerful as ever!

SERMON C

Jesus mixed with lots of very different people, such as beggars and tax collectors for example, he also chose 12 very different people to be his disciples. When they followed Jesus, they had to learn to forget their differences and work together. They were prepared to leave their homes and families and give up everything to follow Jesus. What a challenge for us!

It's like that with us too. God has brought the people in our congregation together as part of his family and he wants everyone to work together so that others can hear about Jesus and learn to follow him too.

Just like Jesus' disciples, we all have different gifts and abilities and we are able to do different things.

Division is a disease that the Church suffers from far too often. It is the most damaging event that can happen. It is so bad that despite all the positives that came from it, (from a Protestant point of view) David Watson could still call the Reformation the worst thing that had happened to the Church. Division, by its very nature, divides and, as Jesus said, a house divided can't survive.

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul is so concerned about division that he places the divisions in Corinth at the start of his letter. As in so many differences, these are caused by trying to raise certain individuals above others; the cult of celebrity was alive and well in Corinth. Paul is having none of it, though. It is by placing Christ at the centre, and only this, that we can be joined with our brothers and sisters.

So let us never waste time arguing. Let us concentrate on what matters – the good news about God's love and forgiveness for us. It can be all too easy to lose track of the fact that there is only one person that we should be following – and that is Jesus.

Let me end with these quotes about unity and conflict in the Church:

'I ask that men make no reference to my name, and call themselves not Lutherans, but Christians. What is Luther?...No, no, my dear friends, let us abolish all party names, and call ourselves Christians after him whose doctrine we have.'
Martin Luther

'I should rejoice, so little ambitious am I to be at the head of any sect or party, if the very name [Methodist] might never be mentioned more, but

be buried in eternal oblivion: John Wesley

‘I say of the Baptist name, let it perish, but let Christ’s name last for ever. I look forward with pleasure to the day when there will not be a Baptist living.’ Charles Haddon Spurgeon

And I say the same of the Presbyterian name – let it perish. Let all our passion be to be Christians.