

3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

After his baptism, Jesus spent 40 days fasting in the desert. Today's gospel is Matthew's account of day 41. Jesus left his hometown Nazareth and went to live in Capernaum by the Sea of Galilee—to this day a scenic spot in the Holy Land. Matthew points out that Jesus moved there not for the view but to fulfill the prophecy we heard in today's first reading. Isaiah describes his vision of what happens to those who live in Galilee: “the people who sit in darkness have seen a great light.” Upon arriving, Jesus proclaimed to them, “the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” It is the beginning of Jesus' public ministry; light has arisen.

Matthew offers two other details about this moment, both having to do with John the Baptist. According to the first line of today's gospel, Jesus had just heard that John had been arrested. They last saw each other 41 days earlier. Now, John was in prison. Second, the first words Jesus spoke in his public ministry were exactly what John proclaimed, word for word: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” Jesus received the baton from his forerunner, no matter the perils of the finish line. Jesus cared about those sitting in darkness. Like a lot of us, they were content with a certain lack of self-knowledge. When we can't see everything around us, we don't have to deal with our dark faults, even though others see them as plain as day.

Consider Matthew's two points: If you are a righteous person proclaiming the gospel like John, you could get yourself arrested; if you are a sinner, you should repent. Neither of these points seems likely to attract followers.

But that is exactly what Jesus does next. Walking along the seashore, he summons two sets of brothers: Simon and Andrew, and James and John. They all seemingly had a strong business. They had boats, nets, and know-how. They grew up in fishing families; they probably had spent their entire lives perfecting their trade. Yet in one instant, seeing Jesus walking along the shore and hearing one summons from his lips, “at once they left their nets and followed him.”

Even today, many people who encounter Jesus for the first time find themselves ready to relinquish possessions and change their plans. They are moved as much by the heart as by the mind. Something attracts them.

Upon meeting a new person, something may attract us; we may connect in a moment. Over time, if we allow them to love us, if we put our trust in them, we'll keep our heart open even when they point out our faults—when they say, in so many words, “Repent.” We may resist moving from the darkness of self-deception to the light of perception. But when we do, especially at the word of someone we love, we become better people.

I recently overheard a loud conversation outdoors at a streetcar stop. One young man was sharing details of his love life with another young man. He used some coarse language to describe the benefits he had been receiving from his girlfriend, but which now she had withdrawn. He asked rhetorically, “What's the point of having a girlfriend?” in the wake of this loss.

Well, the point is not what you get, but what you give. The point is having someone who will shine light onto your darkness. The first apostles followed Jesus because they liked what he said, and they were willing to repent.