

January 26, 2020 Third Sunday in Ordinary Time **“Word of God Sunday”**

### **Bishop Bradley’s Reflections on the Sunday Readings**

January is naturally one of the longest, coldest, and darkest months of the year; so it’s a relief to know that January is almost over, and for the most part, our winter has been fairly moderate. It’s obvious that daylight is lasting longer, and we can begin to see the “light of Spring” at the end of “Winter’s tunnel”. Interestingly, today’s Scripture Readings talked about the coming of the “*great Light*”, not just once but twice---a reason for all of us to be filled with hope.

More important than the coming of Spring, of course, is the fact that God has come to make His dwelling among us. ***That*** is what both the Reading from the Prophet Isaiah in our First Reading today and Jesus quoting that very same passage in today’s Gospel passage from St. Matthew were referring to: “*the people who sit in darkness have seen a great light; on those dwelling in a land overshadowed by death, light has arisen.*” This “light” does so much more than take away our winter doldrums; it renews our very spirits, knowing that our God lives among us and is with us.

Just a few weeks ago, we heard parts of this very same passage from the Prophet Isaiah at the Christmas Midnight Mass as we celebrated the Birth of Jesus filling us with Christmas Joy. Today, on this Third Sunday in Ordinary Time, we celebrate a kind of mini-Christmas as we witness a “birth” of sorts as Jesus, having completed His formative years and received Baptism from John the Baptist and His Father’s official endorsement, now publicly begins His ministry by preaching and calling people to follow Him. St. Matthew makes sure that we know that the exact location where Jesus begins His ministry is the very place where Isaiah the Prophet, a thousand years before, had promised the people of “*Zebulun and Napthali*” that their time of “*darkness*” and “*gloom*” had come to an end, because the “*great Light*” would soon lead them into Joy. Jesus leaves Nazareth and moves into that exact Gentile territory of Capernaum to begin to shine that Light by His very Presence to the people of the world still living in the darkness of sin. His message is simple: “*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*” Really, that is the essence of the entire Gospel message. Jesus uses the imperative word

*“Repent!”*, because repenting from sin is the way for all people to find their way out of the darkness of their own sin and selfishness, and to find their way into the joy of Jesus, the Light of the world. And so Jesus’ first Word is a command: *“Repent!”* It’s urgent for us to repent now, not later---not when Spring comes, not when Lent comes, not when we get around to it---no, we need to do it now! Repentance is an essential first step in Jesus’ Gospel message; it is a key ingredient to being freed from the oppression of sin and the depression of having no sense of direction in life. Jesus comes to tell us that He IS the direction; as He will tell us, *“I am the way, the truth and the life”*. And immediately after His first “public sermon”, Jesus begins to call individuals to follow Him. First Peter, and his brother Andrew; then James and his brother John, with the words: *“Come after Me and I will make you fishers of men.”* Just as Jesus’ call to “Repent!” was an imperative, so His invitation to “follow” was one that had a sense of urgency, and caused amazingly immediate results. St. Matthew tells us that Peter and Andrew *“at once left their nets and followed Him”*; James and John *“immediately left their boat and their father and followed Him”*.

In this brief Gospel passage, we come to know four critically important insights: 1) who Jesus is; 2) what Jesus said; 3) who Jesus called; and 4) what Jesus calls us to do. First, 1) who is Jesus? He is the “Light” Who dispels the darkness of the world; He is the Light at the end of the dark tunnel of sin and death. Secondly, 2) what did Jesus say? He’s very clear that all of us need to “repent”; we need to do that now; we need to turn away from anything that keeps us from seeing the Light clearly and from living in the Kingdom freely. Thirdly, 3) who did Jesus call? He didn’t just call those first four disciples, and the other eight who would all become the 12 Apostles, but Jesus called the enormous crowds that began following Him in that historical moment, as well as the thousands, millions and billions over the generations since that first “call” who have been Jesus followers, including each and every one of us who are trying to follow Jesus in our lives. And finally, 4) what does Jesus call us to do? He calls us first of all to repent, and then to respond to His teaching, to hear His Good News and live according to the Gospel, to allow Jesus to free us from the forces of evil in

our lives which try to lead us in directions that are opposite of His, and to be His joyful witnesses in the world.

What is also very clear is that Jesus' call is free. No one is forced to follow Him. Each person has the choice, either to ignore Jesus' call, or to choose to follow Him. But if we choose to follow Him, we need to do so wholeheartedly, not picking and choosing what we will do and not do, but rather doing our best, with Jesus' grace, to adhere to those four basic ways of living our lives as Jesus followers.

Today's Second Reading from St. Paul's first Letter to the Corinthians is so appropriate to all of us in the reality of the world in which we are living. We're all painfully aware that our society is fractured, and people are very polarized. In addition, even within the Body of Christ, we know that there are sad and scandalous divisions as evidenced in the numerous "denominations" of Christians. Just yesterday the annual Week of Prayer for Christian Unity concluded, but we need to pray for unity within the Body of Christ every day. And of course, even within our own Catholic Church, there are sad divisions and allegiances, none of which is what Jesus would want. St. Paul urges the Corinthians, and all of us, to put division and disunity aside and live only in the oneness that comes from truly following Jesus. In addition to the divisions within the Church are the divisions among people in general. We are living in a time when people are less inclined to believe in objective Truth and are more inclined to believe in their own interpretation or version of the Truth. In fact, we oftentimes hear people actually using those terms: "that is 'your truth', but I prefer to live according to 'my truth'." In many ways, people today tend to see themselves as their own "authority" rather than trusting in a higher authority, whether that is the government, the Church, or even God Himself. We find the ultimate Truth in Jesus Himself. Not only does he give us the direction in our lives as the Way, but He also reveals to us the Truth and brings us into everlasting Life.

On this Third Sunday in Ordinary Time, Pope Francis has designated this Sunday to be "Word of God Sunday". While each Mass is dedicated to the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist, Pope Francis asks that on this one

Sunday we remember how important the Word of God is for all of us. As He so beautifully said: "That is why the Lord give you His Word, so that you can receive it like a love letter He has written to you, to help you realize that He is at your side. His Word consoles and encourages us. And the same time, it challenges us, frees us from the bondage of our selfishness and summons us to conversion." In our daily prayers, we need to make sure that in addition to those treasured prayers that we pray "off by heart", we need to be taking time each day to reflect on God's Word. Again, as Pope Francis said in his homily today: "Each day let us read a verse or two of the Bible. Let us begin with the Gospel; let us keep it open on our table, carry it in our pocket, read it on our cell phones, and allow it to inspire us daily."

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ, Jesus, the Word of God made Flesh, has come into our world. He *IS* the Light Who dispels all darkness; He *IS* Hope Who takes away our gloom, fears and anxiety; He *IS* the One Who calls us to "repent"--right now, because it's that important---so that we can follow Him into the ways of THE Truth which sets us free. This is why Jesus was Born on Christmas, and lived among us: to bring us the Light. This Light is no longer just at the end of some far-distant "tunnel" of waiting; the Light is here, calling us to "*Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*"

God bless you, now and always!