

Commentary to the 3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time (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 projects, abandons Christ—the light—and is swallowed by darkness.

Man 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 are in the state of tossing and turning in the morning (Jn 7:3-4).

One who precipitates in the darkness of vice, falsehood, injustice also waits for the ray of light. One who announces the end of a painful night and the beginning of a new day waits 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 of sin in the world be? 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).

To internalize the message, we repeat:

“We were darkness but now we are light. Make us, O Lord, behave as children of the light.”

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First Reading: Isaiah 8:23b–9:3

With the exception of the first verse, we have already heard this reading at Mass on Christmas Eve. For a more complete understanding of the text, you can then refer to the explanation that is given.

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, imposition of heavy taxes were the consequences of the invasion of armies coming from Mesopotamia. The dramatic situation is presented by Isaiah as a humiliation, permitted by the Lord, as a triumph of darkness over the light.

In the region of Galilee, it was as if 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. It was resigned to see the glorious “Way of the sea” that, passing through Palestine, connected Egypt to Mesopotamia and forever guarded by the arrogant Assyrian soldiers.

At this time of general smashing, 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 of the national disaster, withdraw and Israel to resume its life in joy and peace.

The light referred to by the prophet was certainly a new king, a descendant of David’s family. He was destined to carry out the 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 hundred 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 very narrow and limited. If we do not immediately see our projects materializing we think that God has forgotten us. He fulfills his promises, but in an unexpected way and in God’s due time.

If the dreams of the people 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 struggle for power. The prophecy is realized, according to the logic of God, 750 years later.

When Jesus showed up along the shores of the lake, the kingdom of the Assyrians had already collapsed hundreds of years, 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 thin out—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

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 to Paul a letter 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 telling openly 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 on their moral behavior. There were debaucheries 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 about the disagreements, conflicts and the divisions in that community. It is the passage that 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; the Savior is only one, Christ. What caused such discord were—then as now—selfishness, the desire to dominate others, to prevail among others, and to impose oneself 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 very dense and were hard to dissolve.

Gospel: Matthew 4:12-23

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 fishermen and farmers that stretched for about three hundred 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 rich and prosperous Magdala, famous for its flourishing industries of salted fish and dyeing. However, it enjoyed a certain prestige: it was along the “Way of the Sea”—the famous imperial road. It started from Egypt and passing through Damascus it 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 a duty of all merchandise was collected.

Matthew does not merely record Jesus' change of residence. He complements the information with a reference to 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 viewed with suspicion 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 very trivial fact—has been read by Matthew in 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, among the mountains of Galilee, the dawn of a new day shone. 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 “to radically change the way of thinking and acting.” One who has cultivated projects of death must open oneself to the choices of life. One who moved in darkness must turn towards the light. Only if one is willing to carry out this change then one can enter into the kingdom of heaven (not in paradise, but in the new condition of one who chooses to risk his life on the word of Christ).

In the second part of the passage, the calling of the first four disciples is narrated.

It’s 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. 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 they left their nets, the boat and their father and followed him” (vv. 20,22).

The abandonment of one’s own father should not be misunderstood. It does not mean that anyone who becomes a Christian (or chooses the religious and consecrated life) must ignore one’s own parents. Among the Jewish people, the father was the symbol of the link with the ancestors and of attachment to tradition. And it is this dependence on the past that must be broken when it constitutes an impediment to welcome 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, 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 do: choosing to become disciples they were rejected by the family, misunderstood by parents, expelled from the synagogues and excluded from their people.

Even today for someone this may represent the inescapable alternative between the love of “the father” and the choice of Christ. Just think of what it takes for a Muslim, a Jew, a pagan, a Buddhist to adhere to Christianity.

For all, however, leaving the father implies the abandonment of everything that is 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 fishing with a hook, but with the net and their work was to pull out of the sea (so the Lake of Galilee is incorrectly called) the fish.

Now, 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. In the sea, the monsters lived and in it, even the most skilled sailors did not feel safe.

Fishing people means to get them out of the condition of death where they are. It means to pull them out 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 it, even when they are raging. He does not give up hope to save a brother, even when he is in a humanly desperate situation: a slave of drugs and alcohol, unbridled passion, irascible, aggressive and intractable character. In whatever situation he is he will be saved by the disciple of Christ.

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

Fernando Armellini

Fernando Armellini is an Italian missionary and biblical scholar. With his permission we have begun translating his Sunday reflections on the three readings from the original Italian into English. - See more at:

<http://www.bibleclaret.org/celebrating-the-word-of-god#sthash.mJAK8wbI.dpuf>

Fr. Fernando Armellini - Claret Bible.org