**THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (YEAR A)**

SUNDAY OF THE WORD OF GOD

Is 8:23-9:3; Ps 27; 1Cor 1:10-13,17; Mt 4:12-23

*The Lord is my light and my salvation*

**COMMENTARY**

*Light of the world*

The Word of God in today’s Liturgy invites us to contemplate the beginning of Jesus’ public activities, as recounted by St. Matthew in his gospel. From the evangelist’s emphases we can note and better understand some fundamental characteristics of Christ’s mission and, by extension, the mission of all His disciples. Such an in-depth study is very significant and more than appropriate in today’s context of the Sunday of the Word and the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity that we celebrate during these days

*1.* “*Beginning in Galilee*”

It is a historical fact that Jesus began His public activities from Galilee, the northern region of the land of Israel. This is emphasized in various sources, and succinctly and emblematically, St. Peter the Apostle announces it thus in one of his discourses in the Acts of the Apostles (which we have already heard in this year’s Feast of Baptism): “[You know] what has happened all over Judea, *beginning in Galilee* after the baptism that John preached, how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the holy Spirit and power. *He went about doing good and healing all*” (Acts 10:37-38).

Starting from that fact, St. Matthew the Evangelist wanted to further accentuate the dual nature of this Galilee from which Jesus began His public mission. On the one hand, it is the “Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali,” i.e., the territory that was handed over as an inheritance to these two tribes of Israel (after entering the Promised Land). On the other hand, it is also called the “Galilee of the Gentiles,” i.e., Galilee of the pagan peoples, because after the fall of the Northern Kingdom of Israel (721/722 B.C.), the non-Israelite peoples who slowly populated that region went there to live. This “dual” identity of Galilee is mentioned in the writing of the prophet Isaiah (first reading), and this is precisely taken up by the evangelist Matthew to emphasize the fulfillment of Scripture for the beginning of Jesus’ mission.

Galilee then in Jesus’ time is that of the Gentiles *and* Israel; it thus becomes the image of the whole world in which Israelites and non-Israelites, Jews and Gentiles, coexisted. It was the (micro)cosmos in which Jesus operated and fulfilled God’s plan of salvation for all humankind. In that land Jesus, Son of God began it all, thus arose God’s “a great light” for “the people who sit in darkness.” So much so that He Himself will declare, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (Jn 8:12). He is the light that illuminates and reveals, in word and deed, the true face of the merciful and compassionate God who loves and calls everyone to know, that is, to experience, His love in order to enjoy life in abundance with and in God. This begins in the Galilee of Israel and the Gentiles.

In this regard, it is significant that St. Matthew, at the end of his gospel, will “take” everyone, Jesus and His disciples, back “to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had ordered them” (Mt 28:16). There the last appearance of the Risen Jesus to His disciples will take place, before the Ascension, and there He will leave them the great missionary command: “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations […]. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age” (Mt 28:19-20). Thus closes the circle of Jesus’ mission on earth: from Galilee to Galilee, and so now begins the mission of His disciples, of all, including those who are “doubting” (cf. Mt 28:17): from Galilee to the whole world whose symbol remains that land of Zàbulon and Naphtali. Though going to the farthest ends of the earth, Jesus’ missionary disciples will mystically remain in this Galilee *of* *His*, where He will continue to be with them in their missionary activities “always, until the end of the age”. Therefore, His disciples will also have the same mission and vocation to be “light of the world,” just like their Master Jesus, God’s light shining in the darkness, in the Galilee of the world.

*2.* “*He went around all of Galilee, teaching… proclaiming… and curing*”

In light of the symbolism of “Galilee,” it is no coincidence that the evangelist Matthew later wanted to offer a summary description of Jesus’ activities, “He went around [periēgen] all of Galilee, teaching [didaskōn]… proclaiming [kēryssōn]… and curing [therapeuōn]”. The accentuation of “*all* l of Galilee” seems to emphasize the “universal” and “ubiquitous” character of the mission, while the four verbs summarize the four basic actions of Jesus, the Father’s Mission par excellence.

Firstly, “He went around [*periēgen*]” and this is the first characteristic of God’s mission, in the sense of “the most important.” It encompasses (or supports) the other actions, particularly that paradigmatic triad: “teaching [*didaskōn*]… proclaiming [*kēryssōn*]… and curing [*therapeuōn*]”. Jesus “going around” reflects a historical truth: the historical Jesus went from village to village to carry out the mission entrusted to Him by the Father. He advised His disciples to go as He did, but with an important clarification: “Do not move about from one house to another (Lk 10:7)” (from village to village yes, but not from house to house, perhaps to avoid religious tourism instead of missionary travel!). It should be recalled here what Jesus declared to the first disciples in Capernaum, when they sought Him early in the morning after a day of activity and found Him in solitary prayer in a deserted place outside the city: “Let us go on to the nearby villages that I may preach there also. For this purpose have I come [literally *I went out*]” (Mk 1:38). Jesus, God’s missionary, who divinely came forth from the bosom of the Father, is now always “going out” to the villages of “all of Galilee.”

Moreover, as mentioned above, in His mission Jesus performed the three concrete actions that incorporate all the others. What is more, as St. Matthew points out in the text, the universality of the recipients/beneficiaries of these actions is indicated: “teaching in their synagogues” for the Jews, “proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom,” – implied for all, but particularly for those who did not attend synagogues, “and curing every disease and illness among the people” – for one another (in fact, Jesus performed healings both in and outside the synagogues!)

On this triad of actions one could speak endlessly, but it suffices for us here to point out that they are intrinsically connected with each other in Jesus’ missionary activities; they go together and aim at the integral liberation and salvation (body, soul, spirit) that God wants to accomplish through Jesus, His Messiah, as St. Peter the apostle affirms in his discourse mentioned above, “God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the holy Spirit and power. *He went about doing good and healing all those oppressed by the devil*, for God was with him” (Acts 10:38).

This triad will be fundamental and to be remembered and accomplished by every missionary of God in the school of Jesus: teaching, proclaiming, healing, of which the focus was and always is proclaiming [*kēryssō*], also translatable as preaching, the good news of the Kingdom of God. Indeed, the very first action and word of Jesus that the evangelist mentions is this: “From that time on, Jesus began to preach and say,‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.’” (Mt 4:17).

*3.* “*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*” *Continuous, Missionary, Ecumenical Christian Conversion for the Kingdom*

The announcement of the coming of the Kingdom of God (here called “kingdom of heaven” to avoid, according to the Jewish way, mentioning God directly) goes together with the cordial invitation to conversion to welcome this new God-given reality in Jesus. Indeed, conversion, or rather the action of being converted, as we explained in one of the previous commentaries, is not limited to a simple abandonment of sins in order to return to God; according to the etymology of the Greek word *metanoiete* “repent!”, it also and above all implies a thinking (*noeite*) beyond (*meta*), a going beyond the usual patterns of reasoning, to believe the Gospel announced and fulfilled by Jesus and to embrace the gift of the Kingdom that has come to all in Him.

Interestingly, according to Matthew’s gospel (which we hear today and on the Sundays of this liturgical year A), such a cordial but pressing invitation to conversion for the sake of the Kingdom was not first announced by Jesus. It was already on the lips of John the Baptist who thus becomes Jesus’ forerunner even in the fundamental proclamation of the Kingdom. The proclamation of the approaching Kingdom will later resonate in the proclamation of Jesus’ disciples, sent by Him to prepare for its coming, as their Master and Lord recommended, “As you go, make this proclamation: ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand.’” (Mt 10:7). This always implies a call to conversion, that is, a change of mind and heart to accept the gift of the Kingdom in Jesus, and this exhortation is made explicit by St. Peter at the end of his first preaching on the day of Pentecost: “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ…” (Acts 2:38).

This proclamation-invitation will always remain at the heart of the mission of the disciples who are followers of Jesus, called to work in every time and place for the conversion of all to God, starting with themselves. Therefore, Blessed Paolo Manna, tireless missionary in Burma and founder of the present Pontifical Missionary Union, proclaimed in his time “All the churches united for the conversion of the whole world,” a phrase also quoted by St. John Paul II in the Encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* as the watchwords for the mission of the Church today.

In this regard, it should be emphasized again that the call to conversion also and especially applies to all Christians, who are called to become more and more what they are by virtue of baptism: “holy and immaculate in love,” “light of the world,” or as Pope Francis emphasized in the latest Message for World Mission Sunday: “prophets, witnesses, missionaries of the Lord.” It is about the ongoing conversion in the life of faith of the disciples, who due to human frailty do not always live up to their vocational “holiness,” as happened already for the first Christians in Corinth who “merited” the solemn exhortation of St. Paul the Apostle: “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” (1Cor 1:10). It should be remembered that the Lord Jesus Himself prayed to the Father in moving words before the Passion for unity in love among His future disciples, “So that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me. I in them and you in me, that they may be brought to perfection as one” (Jn 17:21,23). Let us then pray:

*O Lord, make us feel still and ever more in us Your heart all taken up for the Kingdom of God as well as Your cordial invitation to conversion to Your Gospel of peace and love. Help us to constantly live out this conversion in our lives, so that we may become ourselves, with You and in You, the living invitation, in word and deed, to conversion to the Kingdom for those who do not know You. And in this our mission to be witnesses of You and Your Kingdom, help, Your disciples, to be more and more united in Your love, overcoming the divisions that exist in our churches and communities. Let Your face shine upon us, and we will be saved and resplendent with Your Light for all the world. Mary, mother of Christ and mother of His disciples, pray for us! Amen!*

*Useful points to consider:*

**John Paul II**, Encyclical Letter on commitment to Ecumenism, ***Ut unum sint***

***Renewal and conversion***

15. Passing from principles, from the obligations of the Christian conscience, to the actual practice of the ecumenical journey towards unity, the Second Vatican Council emphasizes above all *the need for interior conversion*. The messianic proclamation that “the time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God is at hand”, and the subsequent call to “repent, and believe in the Gospel” (*Mk* 1:15) with which Jesus begins his mission, indicate the essential element of every new beginning: the fundamental need for evangelization at every stage of the Church’s journey of salvation. his is true in a special way of the process begun by the Second Vatican Council, when it indicated as a dimension of renewal the ecumenical task of uniting divided Christians. *“There can be no ecumenism worthy of the name without a change of heart*”.

The Council calls for personal conversion as well as for communal conversion. The desire of every Christian Community for unity goes hand in hand with its fidelity to the Gospel. In the case of individuals who live their Christian vocation, the Council speaks of interior conversion, of a renewal of mind.

Each one therefore ought to be more radically converted to the Gospel and, without ever losing sight of God’s plan, change his or her way of looking at things. Thanks to ecumenism, our contemplation of “the mighty works of God” (*mirabilia Dei*) has been enriched by new horizons, for which the Triune God calls us to give thanks: the knowledge that the Spirit is at work in other Christian Communities, the discovery of examples of holiness, the experience of the immense riches present in the communion of saints, and contact with unexpected dimensions of Christian commitment. In a corresponding way, there is an increased sense of the need for repentance: an awareness of certain exclusions which seriously harm fraternal charity, of certain refusals to forgive, of a certain pride, of an unevangelical insistence on condemning the “other side”, of a disdain born of an unhealthy presumption. Thus, the entire life of Christians is marked by a concern for ecumenism; and they are called to let themselves be shaped, as it were, by that concern.

23. Finally, *fellowship in prayer leads people to look at the Church and Christianity in a new way*. It must not be forgotten in fact that the Lord prayed to the Father that his disciples might be one, so that their unity might bear witness to his mission and the world would believe that the Father had sent him (cf. *Jn* 17:21). It can be said that the ecumenical movement in a certain sense was born out of the negative experience of each one of those who, in proclaiming the one Gospel, appealed to his own Church or Ecclesial Community. This was a contradiction which could not escape those who listened to the message of salvation and found in this fact an obstacle to acceptance of the Gospel. Regrettably, this grave obstacle has not been overcome. It is true that we are not yet in full communion. And yet, despite our divisions, we are on the way towards full unity, that unity which marked the Apostolic Church at its birth and which we sincerely seek. Our common prayer, inspired by faith, is proof of this. In that prayer, we gather together in the name of Christ who is One. He is our unity.

***Full unity and evangelization***

98. The ecumenical movement in our century, more than the ecumenical undertakings of past centuries, the importance of which must not however be underestimated, has been characterized by a missionary outlook. In the verse of John’s Gospel which is ecumenism’s inspiration and guiding motif—”that they may all be one ... so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (*Jn* 17:21)—the phrase *that the world may believe* has been so strongly emphasized that at times we run the risk of forgetting that, in the mind of the Evangelist, unity is above all for the glory of the Father. At the same time it is obvious that the lack of unity among Christians contradicts the Truth which Christians have the mission to spread and, consequently, it gravely damages their witness. This was clearly understood and expressed by my Predecessor Pope Paul VI, in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*: “As evangelizers, we must offer Christ’s faithful not the image of people divided and separated by unedifying quarrels, but the image of people who are mature in faith and capable of finding a meeting-point beyond the real tensions, thanks to a shared, sincere and disinterested search for truth. Yes, the destiny of evangelization is certainly bound up with the witness of unity given by the Church ... At this point we wish to emphasize the sign of unity among all Christians as the way and instrument of evangelization. The division among Christians is a serious reality which impedes the very work of Christ”.

How indeed can we proclaim the Gospel of reconciliation without at the same time being committed to working for reconciliation between Christians? However true it is that the Church, by the prompting of the Holy Spirit and with the promise of indefectibility, has preached and still preaches the Gospel to all nations, it is also true that she must face the difficulties which derive from the lack of unity. When non-believers meet missionaries who do not agree among themselves, even though they all appeal to Christ, will they be in a position to receive the true message? Will they not think that the Gospel is a cause of division, despite the fact that it is presented as the fundamental law of love?

**Pope Francis,** Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World, ***Evangelii Gaudium***

*Ecumenical dialogue*

244. Commitment to ecumenism responds to the prayer of the Lord Jesus that “they may all be one” (*Jn* 17:21). The credibility of the Christian message would be much greater if Christians could overcome their divisions and the Church could realize “the fullness of catholicity proper to her in those of her children who, though joined to her by baptism, are yet separated from full communion with her”. We must never forget that we are pilgrims journeying alongside one another. This means that we must have sincere trust in our fellow pilgrims, putting aside all suspicion or mistrust, and turn our gaze to what we are all seeking: the radiant peace of God’s face. Trusting others is an art and peace is an art. Jesus told us: “Blessed are the peacemakers” (*Mt* 5:9). In taking up this task, also among ourselves, we fulfil the ancient prophecy: “They shall beat their swords into ploughshares” (*Is* 2:4).

[…]

246. Given the seriousness of the counter-witness of division among Christians, particularly in Asia and Africa, the search for paths to unity becomes all the more urgent. Missionaries on those continents often mention the criticisms, complaints and ridicule to which the scandal of divided Christians gives rise. If we concentrate on the convictions we share, and if we keep in mind the principle of the hierarchy of truths, we will be able to progress decidedly towards common expressions of proclamation, service and witness. The immense numbers of people who have not received the Gospel of Jesus Christ cannot leave us indifferent. Consequently, commitment to a unity which helps them to accept Jesus Christ can no longer be a matter of mere diplomacy or forced compliance, but rather an indispensable path to evangelization. Signs of division between Christians in countries ravaged by violence add further causes of conflict on the part of those who should instead be a leaven of peace. How many important things unite us! If we really believe in the abundantly free working of the Holy Spirit, we can learn so much from one another! It is not just about being better informed about others, but rather about reaping what the Spirit has sown in them, which is also meant to be a gift for us. To give but one example, in the dialogue with our Orthodox brothers and sisters, we Catholics have the opportunity to learn more about the meaning of episcopal collegiality and their experience of synodality. Through an exchange of gifts, the Spirit can lead us ever more fully into truth and goodness.

**John Paul II,** Encyclical Letter on the Permanent Validity of the Church’s Missionary Mandate, ***Redemptoris Missio***

1. The mission of Christ the Redeemer, which is entrusted to the Church, is still very far from completion. As the second millennium after Christ’s coming draws to an end, an overall view of the human race shows that this mission is still only beginning and that we must commit ourselves wholeheartedly to its service. It is the Spirit who impels us to proclaim the great works of God: “For if I preach the Gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel!” (1 Cor 9: 16)

In the name of the whole Church, I sense an urgent duty to repeat this cry of St. Paul. From the beginning of my Pontificate I have chosen to travel to the ends of the earth in order to show this missionary concern. My direct contact with peoples who do not know Christ has convinced me even more of the *urgency of missionary activity*, a subject to which I am devoting the present encyclical.

The Second Vatican Council sought to renew the Church’s life and activity in the light of the needs of the contemporary world. The Council emphasized the Church’s “missionary nature,” basing it in a dynamic way on the Trinitarian mission itself. The missionary thrust therefore belongs to the very nature of the Christian life, and is also the inspiration behind ecumenism: “that they may all be one...so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (Jn 17:21).