

# THE EMMAUS SERIES

## **THIRD SUNDAY A**

Isaiah 8:23 – 9:3

1 Corinthians 1: 10-13, 17

Matthew 4: 12-23

## **The people that lived in darkness have seen a great light**

Today's scholarship helps us to understand how the first three gospels were put together. Though they are not biographies in today's sense, they tell the story of Jesus, incorporating material deriving from recollections of Jesus circulating among the first Christian communities, within the well known sequence of his life - his baptism by John; his teaching and healing ministry in Galilee; his journey to Jerusalem; and his passion and its aftermath. We have already seen that Matthew presents Jesus to an audience with a Jewish background. The abundant material contained in this - the longest of the gospels - alternates narrative sequences with long passages containing the teaching of Jesus upon particular themes. Today's gospel concludes the gospel's introductory narrative section - concerning the birth of Jesus, his baptism by John and his temptations in the wilderness. It serves as a solemn prelude to the next three chapters, in which the heart of the teaching of Jesus is presented as The Sermon on the Mount.

Jesus inaugurated his public ministry, as the events that were to lead to the death of John the Baptist brought an end to Old Testament prophecy. Matthew underlines the significance of this development by invoking his theme, 'This was to fulfil the words of the prophet'. As we have seen, Matthew does not claim to be giving a rigorous interpretation of the prophet's text; he is expressing the conviction that, read with faith in Christ, the writings of the Old Testament resonate with an anticipation of what is to come. The passage Matthew cites is the first reading of today's liturgy. Speaking to his contemporaries, Isaiah is referring to contemporary events - probably expressing the hope that the northernmost territories of the old kingdom of David will be recovered by one of David's descendants, so that the 'yoke' of Assyria would be 'broken'. Coming from Isaiah, the courtier who urged the king to trust in the promises made to the descendants of David, this hope certainly had messianic overtones. The ministry of Jesus, 'Son of David' - in Galilee - is seen by Matthew as fulfilling these expectations.

The fact that the life and ministry of Jesus took place in Galilee helps us to situate him in his world, and in the designs of God. This northern extremity of the old kingdom, 'Galilee of the Gentiles' (district encircled by Gentiles) was a cosmopolitan crossroads of cultures, including many pagans in its population. Its people were bi-lingual, speaking both Greek and Aramaic - the common language of Palestine in the time of Jesus. Galileans were, not surprisingly, looked down upon by the nation's establishment, centred in Jerusalem. In the designs of God, the world's Saviour came among us as one who shared the lot of a composite population with little standing and influence - 'Can any good come out of Nazareth?' (Jn 1:46).

As we shall see, the Church is to be one of the key themes of Matthew's gospel. This is anticipated in the fact that his solemn prelude to the Sermon on the Mount includes the calling of the four apostles who will be prominent in the ministry of Jesus.

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