

Mt. 4:12-23, Isa. 8:23b-9:3. Third Sunday of the Year
Peter van Dael SJ

THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS NEAR!

Light in the Galilee of the Gentiles

The first reading places us in northern Israel. This area is threatened by the powerful king of Assyria. Jewish residents are being deported, pagan settlers from elsewhere are being imported. According to Isaiah, this area has become domain of other nations (Isa. 8:23). But the prophet insists that God is on the side of his threatened people and that there will ultimately be salvation: *The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light* (Isa. 9:1).

The Gospel also places us in this northern region. We heard in the Gospel that Jesus departed to *Galilee of the Gentiles* (Mt. 4:14), in the north. Here, on the edge of the land of the Jews, in a remote corner of the Roman Empire, Jesus begins his mission: he proclaimed the good news of the kingdom—God's new world—and healed every disease and sickness among the people (Matthew 4:23). With his ministry, Isaiah's vision of light from the first reading begins to become reality, and God's saving intervention becomes visible: *so that what was spoken by Isaiah the prophet had to be fulfilled* we hear in the Gospel (Matthew 4:14). Jesus is not portrayed as a miracle worker or a faith healer, but as someone from whom evil demons flee—the demons of jealousy, resentment, revenge, fear, and violence. Jesus offers new perspectives to people paralyzed by despair and frustration. In other words, here is the kingdom of God, that kingdom of justice and peace that Jesus speaks of so often.

Jesus' first disciples

But with the coming of Jesus, the Kingdom of God, God's new world, was not yet complete. We heard in the Gospel reading how Jesus sought and found allies. The first called were fishermen. First, Jesus called Simon and Andrew. They left their nets and followed him. Then he called James and John. They left their nets, their boat, and their father and followed Jesus.

These four apostles were called away from their professions and families. Thanks to their professions and families, they had previously had security. But Jesus called them to a new life, to a new community. At that time, family meant the social safety net par excellence, but family also meant: us, not them. Jesus called for a solidarity that transcended the boundaries of one's own family and group, to a community in which no one is excluded.

The calling of the four was quite overwhelming. Jesus saw Simon and Andrew, James and John, called them, and they immediately left everything and followed him. With ordinary rabbis, students would apply to them. But in Matthew, we hear that the initiative came from Jesus. He called, and they

followed. No further biographical or psychological details are mentioned. Nothing about a calling story. The only thing that mattered was that Jesus called. This says something about the nature of the kingdom. The initiative does not come from man, but from God. Man is allowed to respond to this.

Conclusions

We draw three conclusions. The first striking thing is that the origin of the new future lies not in the center, but in the periphery. Not in the capital, Jerusalem, where power and authority reside, but on the outskirts. This illustrates the fact that the Kingdom of God is not based on what is central and important on earth, not on human power and authority.

Secondly, it is striking that the initiative comes from God. It is not Peter and Andrew, James and John who choose Jesus as their teacher. But it is Jesus who chooses them and calls them away from their old lives.

Thirdly, it is striking that the first-called disciples respond to Jesus' call, directly and spontaneously. Calling is one half, responding is the other. Both belong together. Because the called ones, ordinary fishermen, said yes, they could become *fishers of men* and more and more people could be "caught," so that God's new world could grow.

But now, after two thousand years, we must conclude that this kingdom still hasn't arrived. *That Kingdom of Yours, you know, will it ever come to anything?*, to quote Gerard Reve (from: *Closer to You*). We can only say that, as far as God is concerned, this kingdom is coming. From God's perspective, the possibilities are there. But man is also a party: he must want it to. To apply it to ourselves: we too must want to. The vision only becomes reality when we say yes to it. Then this kingdom, bit by bit, becomes reality. At any moment, we can make that vision come true. Today, we can begin a new future. Every person, in any place and at any time, can bring about the kingdom of God in their own way. However small and insignificant our part, the kingdom grows under our hands. We can be sure of that.