

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)

January 26 and 27, 2008

Third Anniversary of St. Katharine Drexel Parish

Isaiah 8:23-9:3;

I Corinthians 1: 10-13, 17;

Matthew 4: 12-23.

“Peacefully do at each moment what at that moment needs to be done.”

Three years ago as we gathered to celebrate the founding of this parish community I spoke those words of our patron Saint Katharine Drexel saying that I believed they formed the backdrop of our celebration that day. I still believe that. We are called to “peacefully” celebrate this anniversary of our founding. We are called to “peacefully” gather again around the Table of The Eucharist and here be nourished for our journey of faith. “Peacefully” we take in God’s Word and we are again claimed by that Word, challenged by that Word and strengthened by that Word for our mission.

The Word that comes to us in the Gospel passage we have just heard has two parts: the preaching of Jesus and the call to discipleship. Neither is incidental: John has been arrested and the “land is overshadowed by death.” It is at this time that Jesus continues the call John first took up, the call to recognize that the “kingdom of heaven is at hand and it is in this place that Jesus calls the first of his followers, his first disciples. Darkness and death do not stop Jesus or his ministry indeed they become the very reason for his ministry, for his whole life.

As Jesus begins his public ministry he issues two simple commands: “repent” and “come after me.” As simple as these two realities might sound they embody the whole of what discipleship is all about. Both demands are made urgent for the same reason: “the kingdom of God is at hand.” It was the religious expectation of that time that God’s saving work would originate from the holy city of Jerusalem and be accomplished by the messiah who would be a political figure, wielding political power. Instead this gospel reminds us that Jesus was an itinerant preacher who was inaugurating God’s kingdom from Gentile territory. The kingdom of God is therefore not about a place but rather the recognition of God’s just, forgiving, loving, rightful rule over all creation.

This was to be the mission and ministry of Jesus; it was the ministry and mission to which Jesus called the disciples, it has been and continues to be the mission and ministry of the Church through the centuries, it is our mission and ministry as a parish community embodied in our hope and desire to “see Christ in all and to be Christ to all.” But has the kingdom of God been realized? Is there still not darkness that needs to be overcome by the light? Are we any closer to seeing and knowing “God’s just, forgiving, loving, rightful rule over all creation?” Certainly we know that there is still darkness that needs the light but just as certain is the fact that the ministry of Jesus’ disciples down through the centuries has had an affect on the world and that Christ’s love still prevails. However, because we have not reached the fulfillment of what the kingdom of God is about we stand always in need of the repentance Jesus calls for and we need to strive to enter more fully into what it means to follow Jesus today.

The good news is that the light begins shining here – among the Gentiles, in the darkness. The call of disciples is to be here – in the darkness and under the threat of death. Establishing God’s kingdom cannot be thwarted by arrest, dark places, or political intrigue. However, it can be thwarted by Jesus’ followers who do not repent and take up his saving mission.

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul calls us to let go of that which gets in the way of living the kingdom here and now, to reach beyond this world with all its preoccupations that are passing and instead to give ourselves over to the power of love and justice that Jesus won for us on the cross. The prophet Isaiah in today’s first reading proclaims to us that if we give ourselves over to the power of the kingdom then even in the midst of the inevitable darkness that can be present in life light will shine dispelling the darkness, sadness gives way to abundant joy and that which burdens us can be removed because our true destiny is not here but lies with Christ.

Jesus embarked on the mission of teaching God’s love, proclaiming forgiveness and new life, and healing in God’s name. Jesus needed the disciples, followers, because they were to follow him in an ever-widening circle of teaching, proclaiming and healing, long after he has gone away.

For the moment he was the light which the people in darkness rejoiced to see; but he would soon say to his followers, 'You are the light of the world', and that is his purpose in choosing his followers.

The Church through the centuries, the Church today, and we as Church here in this local community of faith are not just a group of Christ's followers; the Church *is* Christ continuing to bring light to those in darkness, and calling others to join the ever-widening circle. "To see Christ in all and to be Christ to all." We are Christ in the simple, everyday things that come our way: the friend who needs a listening ear, the elderly parent who needs a comforting phone call, the sick child who interrupts our sleep.

We are Christ as we give ourselves over to all the necessary tasks and ministries that are involved in the establishing of this community of faith, and as we reach beyond ourselves and strive to live the charism of St. Katharine Drexel by bringing the light of hope and justice into the many ways darkness still permeates our world.

As the meaning of the Gospel call to repentance and following Jesus continues to unfold in our life as St. Katharine Drexel parish, as our hearts are more and more transformed by Christ, making us the new creation we are meant to be by reason of our Baptism, the more our world will be transformed and infused with the heart of God.

Permit me to end this homily as I did the very first one three years ago with these words from the Servant of God Pope John Paul the Second because they remind us again what our focus is meant to be and where our strength to be disciples today comes from.

"You must be strong, dear brothers and sisters. You must be strong with the strength that comes from faith..., I ask you to accept once again your spiritual heritage...with faith, hope, and love... I ask that you never despair, never grow weary, never become discouraged; that the roots from which we grow are never severed; that you keep your faith despite weakness, that you always see strength in (Christ); that you never lose that freedom of spirit from which He has liberated (humanity); that you never spurn that love...expressed by the cross, with out which human life has no roots and no meaning. I ask this of you."

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Let us celebrate this anniversary with joy and let us continue to live the invitation of Jesus to both “repent” and “come after him” as we are about the work of building this community of faith, the Parish of Saint Katharine Drexel.

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