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In Jesus of Nazareth, Isaiah's Light Dawned on Humanity

Biblical Reflection for the Third Sunday in Ordinary Time A

By Father Thomas Rosica, CSB

TORONTO, JAN. 18, 2011 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- Both today's first reading from the Prophet Isaiah (Is 8:23-9:3) and the Gospel passage (Matthew 4:12-23) keep alive the memory of Christmas for us. "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them a light has shined."

The choral section from the Nativity cycle of Handel's *Messiah* never ceases to move me each time I listen to Isaiah's prophecy set to hauntingly beautiful music. The words reach their crescendo in the announcement of the birth of a child who will be called: "Wonderful, Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6). Isaiah's prophecy forms the first reading that we hear proclaimed each year at the Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve.

The powerful words of consolation were addressed to those who were in darkness and anguish, those who lived in the Galilean areas of Zebulun and Naphtali, lands located between the Sea of Galilee and the Mediterranean Sea. In today's Gospel, Isaiah's prophecy of the light rising upon Zebulun and Naphtali (Isaiah 8:22-9:1) is fulfilled in Jesus' residence at Capernaum. Since so much of Jesus' ministry takes place in Galilee, and around the Sea of Galilee, it is important for us to have some historical and geographical understanding of the whole region. We must know something about the Old Testament history of the land that Jesus made his own.

Land of deep darkness

Immediately preceding Chapter 9, Isaiah's testimony has built up a frightening picture of the darkness and distress about to descend upon both Judah and the northern kingdom. What is this terrible fate and darkness of the people and why?

After King Ahaz and his people have clearly rejected the Word of God (cf. Isaiah 7:10-12; 8:6a) the Lord declares that he will hide his face from the house of Jacob (8:17) as an indication of his dismay and anger. In a time of anguish and panic due to the wrath of God, people have taken recourse only too easily to mediums and wizards (8:19). But Isaiah observes that it is ridiculous to consult the dead on behalf of the living. In Chapter 8:16-22 we read of the terrible fate that could overtake the people: "There is no dawn for this people" (8:20).

Instead, there is hunger, thirst and misery showing itself in physical as well as spiritual deprivation. People's hearts are darkened and their spirits are greatly disturbed. They get enraged and curse their sinful king and the God whom they have forsaken. They live without hope and any consolation. Whether they turn their faces upward or cast their eyes down to the earth, they will see only distress and darkness while they themselves will be thrust into thick darkness (cf. Exodus 10:22; Deuteronomy 28:29).

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Such darkness penetrates right into the heart and soul and renders the continuation of human life impossible. But that darkness and distress were not Isaiah's last words. Precisely upon this land has shone a great light. A recurring theme in the scriptures is the fact that God acts in the unexpected context, in the unexpected place, in the unexpected time, in the unexpected way.

Isaiah's hope

Chapter 9 of Isaiah's book stands in total contrast to Chapter 8. The opening line of 9:1 forms a transition from the darkness of 8:22. The prophet proclaims a message of hope and consolation as darkness and gloom give way to light and joy. The great light comes decisively into this profound darkness. It tears people away from their confusion and emptiness, from the violence and tyranny of the oppressor. The message of 9:1-7 is directed to those people who were in anguish.

The darkness and gloom that had settled over the land penetrates right into the heart and soul and renders the continuation of human life impossible. But this darkness and distress were not Isaiah's last words. The prophet proclaims a message of hope and consolation as darkness and gloom give way to light and joy. On the inhabitants of a country in the shadow dark as death, light has blazed forth!

The first result of this great light over the peoples will be the fall of the oppressor -- Assyria -- who must be defeated no less decisively than Midian had been (Judges 6). Only after such a decisive defeat can disarmament take place and peace reign. The symbols of the Assyrian oppression: the yoke of their burden, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, shall be broken (9:4). The garments of war shall feed the flames (9:5). The destruction of war-like equipment heralds an age of peace, which is symbolically described in 2:4: "They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more."

Jesus' ministry along the Sea of Galilee

In order to accommodate Jesus' move to Capernaum to Isaiah's prophecy, Matthew speaks of that town as being "in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali" (Matthew 4:13), whereas it was only in the territory of the latter, and he understands the sea of the prophecy, the Mediterranean, as the sea of Galilee. As Jesus moved along the shore of Sea of Galilee, and on the Sea itself, he shed light onto the lives of many people who had experienced the ravages of war, invasion, occupation and violence in the whole area of Zebulun and Naphthali.

In the gospels of Mark and Matthew, that first encounter with disciples is told very briefly (Mark 1:16-20; Matthew 4:18-22). Walking along the shore, Jesus meets Simon and his brother Andrew. They are casting their nets from the shore, probably hoping to catch some of the fish hovering about the warm springs that empty into the sea. He summons them: "Come follow me and I will make you fishers of men." Immediately, we are told, they leave their nets and follow him.

A little further along, he sees James and John, Zebedees' sons. They are sitting in their boats, mending the nets. Wearing, perhaps, after a nightlong bout with the sea. Jesus calls them in the same way; they leave their father and the rest of the crew and follow him. For Jesus and for those whom he called, the Sea was a place and a moment of conversion. It is along the sea that Jesus calls others to join him in his prophetic ministry and outreach to the poor and the sick. Pastoral ministry that is authentic and prophetic enters those areas acquainted with strife, pain, anguish, war and violence, and always reaches out and invites others to follow.

Fulfilling the words of John the Baptist

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At the beginning of his preaching (4:17), Jesus takes up the words of John the Baptist (Matthew 3:2), although with a different meaning; in his ministry the kingdom of heaven has already begun to be present (Matthew 12:28). The call of the first disciples (4:18-22) promises them a share in Jesus' work and entails abandonment of family and former way of life. Three of the four, Simon, James, and John, are distinguished among the disciples by a closer relation with Jesus (Matthew 17:1; 26:37).

In Verse 20, and in Matthew 4:22, as in Mark (1:16-20), and unlike the Lucan account (5:1-11), the disciples' response is motivated only by Jesus' invitation, an element that emphasizes his mysterious power. There is always a before and after in the lives of those who are called by Jesus. For some, the conversion of heart is often a gradual process that takes time. For others, the conversion is an unexpected and all-encompassing lightning bolt experience.

Even though the call to follow Jesus was a privilege beyond imagination, there is no attempt to pretend the disciples were ideal people. They were very real people -- contentious, weak at times, often baffled by Jesus. Even when they understood Jesus and his teaching, the disciples were capable of rejecting and failing him. The Gospel portrayal of the disciples is compassionate because it makes a place for people who struggle to reach their dreams, for people who at times forget their call to greatness. People like us! Following Jesus is a risk, as every new way of life is. Each of us is called to teach as Jesus taught and to heal boldly and compassionately as he did.

Relationship between Old and New

Today let us continue our reflections on "Verbum Domini," Benedict XVI's postsynodal exhortation on "The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the World," and consider the relationship between the Old and the New Testaments (Nos. 40-41).

"40. [...] Moreover, the New Testament itself claims to be consistent with the Old and proclaims that in the mystery of the life, death and resurrection of Christ the sacred Scriptures of the Jewish people have found their perfect fulfillment. It must be observed, however, that the concept of the fulfillment of the Scriptures is a complex one, since it has three dimensions: a basic aspect of continuity with the Old Testament revelation, an aspect of discontinuity and an aspect of fulfillment and transcendence. The mystery of Christ stands in continuity of intent with the sacrificial cult of the Old Testament, but it came to pass in a very different way, corresponding to a number of prophetic statements and thus reaching a perfection never previously obtained. The Old Testament is itself replete with tensions between its institutional and its prophetic aspects. The paschal mystery of Christ is in complete conformity -- albeit in a way that could not have been anticipated -- with the prophecies and the foreshadowings of the Scriptures; yet it presents clear aspects of discontinuity with regard to the institutions of the Old Testament.

"41. These considerations show the unique importance of the Old Testament for Christians, while at the same time bringing out the newness of Christological interpretation. From apostolic times and in her living Tradition, the Church has stressed the unity of God's plan in the two Testaments through the use of typology; this procedure is in no way arbitrary, but is intrinsic to the events related in the sacred text and thus involves the whole of Scripture. Typology "discerns in God's works of the Old Covenant prefigurations of what he accomplished in the fullness of time in the person of his incarnate Son". Christians, then, read the Old Testament in the light of Christ crucified and risen. While typological interpretation manifests the inexhaustible content of the Old Testament from the standpoint of the New, we must not forget that the Old Testament retains its own inherent value as revelation, as our Lord himself reaffirmed (cf. Mark 12:29-31). Consequently, 'the New Testament has to be read in the light of the Old. Early Christian catechesis made constant use of the Old Testament (cf. 1 Corinthians 5:6-8; 1 Corinthians 10:1-11).' For this reason the Synod Fathers stated that 'the Jewish understanding of the Bible can prove helpful to Christians for their own understanding and study of the Scriptures.

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"The New Testament is hidden in the Old and the Old is made manifest in the New,' as St. Augustine perceptively noted. It is important, therefore, that in both pastoral and academic settings the close relationship between the two Testaments be clearly brought out, in keeping with the dictum of Saint Gregory the Great that 'what the Old Testament promised, the New Testament made visible; what the former announces in a hidden way, the latter openly proclaims as present. Therefore the Old Testament is a prophecy of the New Testament; and the best commentary on the Old Testament is the New Testament.'"

Questions for our reflection this week

This week, in light of these rich biblical texts, take a few moments and ask yourself: What have been your own moments of conversion? What experiences or people in your life have been instrumental in deepening your faith? Who have been the instrumental people in you conversion? What concrete actions have you taken after a moment of conversion? How have you invited other people into conversion? In what ways can we, as disciples of Jesus, share in his mission of teaching and healing today?

[The readings for the Third Sunday in Ordinary Time are Isaiah 8:23-9:3-1; 1 Corinthians 1:10-13, 17; Matthew 4:12-23]

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Basilian Father Thomas Rosica, chief executive officer of the Salt and Light Catholic Media Foundation and Television Network in Canada, is a consultor to the Pontifical Council for Social Communications. He can be reached at: rosica@saltandlighttv.org.

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