

First Reading – Isaiah 8:23–9:3: God transformed the fortunes of Zebulun and Naphtali, bringing light to their darkness, joy like a harvest, and breaking the bonds of oppression, reminiscent of Midian's defeat.

Responsorial Psalm – Psalm 27: The Lord is my light, salvation, and stronghold, eliminating all fear. I desire to dwell in His presence forever, confidently expecting to see His goodness in my life.

Second Reading – 1 Corinthians 1:10-13, 17: I urge unity and no divisions among you, to avoid factions that claim allegiance to different leaders. Christ alone should be our focus, not human leaders.

Gospel – Matthew 4:12-23: Jesus retreated to Galilee, fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy by bringing light to a darkened region. He began preaching repentance and assembled his first disciples, starting his ministry of teaching, proclaiming, and healing.

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

The first part of today's gospel narrates a scene after the conclusion of John the Baptist's mission. Jesus moved from Nazareth to Capernaum. He began in Galilee, not Jerusalem. Jesus did not choose Judea as the starting point for his ministry, even though Judea, with Jerusalem, held a special place in religious life, being home to the temple and the priests; instead, He chose Galilee, a region with a complex and diverse social life and multiple religions. This highlights the universality of the preaching of the Gospel, and also shows that God does not choose places that might seem "privileged" because of the temple, the religious authorities, and the "religious people."

Capernaum was a village of fishermen and farmers that stretched for about three hundred meters along the western shore of Lake Gennesaret (Galilee). Galilee was inhabited by Israelites regarded by all as semi-pagans because they were born from the intermingling of different peoples. They were considered as people living in darkness and ignorance.

It became the center of Jesus' activities for nearly three years. The change of residence—a very trivial fact—has been read by Matthew in its theological significance as the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy: "*The people who lived in darkness have seen a great light: on those who live in the land of the shadow of death a light has shone*" (v. 16). With this choice, Jesus indicates who are the first recipients of his light, not the pure Jews but the excluded, the distant.

1. The First Proclamation (Κήρυγμα) = (Kerygma)

Because the message Jesus preached was: "*Repent...*" He sought out the lost sheep first, not the ninety-nine sheep who, though not lost, were not with their shepherd. He preferred to be among sinners to forgive and heal them, rather than among those who considered themselves righteous and did not need repentance. He became the Light for those who sat in darkness but who, guided by a strange star, came to Him, rather than those who thought they were in the light but were indifferent to or rejected Him. He went to places where

people brought Him all kinds of illnesses to be healed, rather than to those who sought Him out to find fault, set traps, and show envy...

The message: "*Repent.*" This is the common message that those who preach the Gospel must live and proclaim. Beginning with the preaching of Saint John the Baptist, through Jesus and to the Apostles... and becoming a prerequisite for receiving the sacraments later on. Repentance means recognizing our mistakes and turning back, repentance means shedding everything to allow God to dwell within us... The first message and condition for receiving the Gospel is "*Repentance,*" which Jesus (though innocent) exemplified for us when He allowed John to baptize Him, thus demonstrating the first message of Jesus: "*Repent.*"

Indeed, only by repenting and acknowledging our sinfulness can we receive forgiveness; only by humbly acknowledging our imperfections can we be filled with grace.

Next, Jesus called and chose his first collaborators, also demonstrating the universality of the calling. He did not discriminate based on social status or background, but what was important was the willingness to leave everything to follow Him. The calling of the first four disciples is narrated. It is more a piece of catechesis than a call narrative. The evangelist wants the disciple to understand what it means to say "yes" to Christ's invitation to follow. It is an example, an illustration of what it means to be converted.

2. The Vocation to Inherit the Proclamation of the Word.

With the urgency of proclaiming Jesus, God chose and called several collaborators, and today's Gospel presents the image of the first Apostles.

On the shores of the Sea of Galilee, where the economic life of the people took place, God came concretely into the ordinary lives of people. He called them in specific circumstances and within the contemporary social context. God did not discriminate between high or low professions, between intellectuals or ordinary people. This shows that the mission of those who follow Christ is to proclaim and bear witness to the Gospel in the specific circumstances of their lives. At the same time, the Gospel is proclaimed through the power of the Holy Spirit, not through human will.

God calls directly, He calls each individual with a command: "Follow me." "To follow" in Hebrew means "to be with," "to be attached" to the Master. God calls in the manner of a superior giving a command; whoever freely believes in Him as the Lord of their life follows Him. Thus, following Christ means being united with Him and being with Him; keeping His commandments, believing in Him, and choosing Him as the Lord of one's life and the mission entrusted to them.

"Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." This means that they must take on a new mission, a new task, the work of the Master, not their own work anymore. Indeed, following Christ is not about escaping worldly affairs, seeking comfort, and avoiding responsibility, but about going out to bring the Gospel to the world and bringing souls back to God. Immediately, they left their nets, their boats, and their father, and followed Jesus." This immediate action (not a gradual process or a matter of careful calculation) demonstrates absolute trust in God. Following this response was the abandonment of everything: their tools

of trade, their livelihood, their profession, and even their family ties, in order to follow Jesus. This requires decisiveness, without hesitation or anything hindering their new mission. Following Jesus means abandoning the old self to live a new life.

Matthew shows Jesus in constant movement. The one who is called must realize that he will not be granted any rest and there will not be any stop along the way. Jesus wants to be followed day and night and throughout life. There are no moments of exemption from commitments taken.

The answer, then, must be prompt and generous as that of Peter, Andrew, James, and John who “*immediately left their nets, their boat and their father, and followed him*” (vv. 20, 22). The abandonment of one’s own father should not be misunderstood. It does not mean that anyone who becomes a Christian (or chooses the religious and consecrated life) must ignore one’s own parents. Among the Jewish people, the father was the symbol of the link with the ancestors and of attachment to tradition. And it is this dependence on the past that must be broken when it constitutes an impediment to welcome the novelty of the gospel. **The history, the traditions, the culture of every people must be respected and valued.** However, we know that not all the habits, customs, ways of life handed down are compatible with the message of Christ.

The demand of Jesus relates to the dramatic choice that the early Christians were called to do: choosing to become disciples they were rejected by the family, misunderstood by parents, expelled from the synagogues, and excluded from their people. For all, leaving the father implies the abandonment of everything that is incompatible with the gospel.

To the invitation to follow him, Jesus adds the charge: “*I will make you fish for people*” (v. 19). The image is taken from the work done by the first apostles. In biblical symbolism, the sea was the abode of the devil, of diseases and everything that opposed life. It was deep, dark, dangerous, mysterious, and terrible. In the sea, the monsters lived, and in it, even the most skilled sailors did not feel safe.

Fishing people means to get them out of the condition of death where they are. It means to pull them out from the forces of evil that, like the raging waters, dominate, engulf, and overwhelm them.

The disciple of Christ does not fear the waves and courageously faces them, even when they are raging. He does not give up hope to save a sister or a brother, even when s/he is in a humanly desperate situation: a slave of drugs and alcohol, unbridled passion, irascible, aggressive, and intractable character. In whatever situation he is he will be saved by the disciple of Christ.

Lord Jesus, you came to this world to bring the Good News to all people, so that those who repent and believe in the Good News may receive salvation. Grant us the grace to cooperate with You in bringing the Good News to the world by influencing them through our virtuous lives. Amen.