

Reflection for the Third Sunday of the Church's Year

The gospels of the last two weekends have focused our attention on events at the river Jordan when Jesus sought baptism from John. We heard St. Matthew's account of what took place a couple of Sundays ago. Matthew then tells us that Jesus "*was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil*"¹ and that he remained there for forty days. During that time John the Baptist was arrested and, when Jesus comes out of the wilderness, he heads for Capernaum to start his public ministry.

St. Matthew wants to cast Jesus' public ministry in terms of deliverance. We know this because he uses a quotation from the prophet Isaiah. It is, of course, a prophecy which we associate with the birth of our Saviour and which we read at Christmas Midnight Mass. Zebulun and Naphtali are the names of two of the twelve sons of Jacob who gave their names to the twelve tribes of Israel. When the twelve tribes came out of slavery in Egypt each tribe (except for the priestly tribe of Levi) was given a portion of the Promised Land. Zebulun and Naphtali were given land in the very north alongside the Sea of Galilee and the Jordan river. Locked in by the Mediterranean Sea these lands were only twenty-five miles wide and so Isaiah describes them as "*the way of the Sea on the far side of the Jordan*" and because they bordered with Israel's neighbours to the north he also calls them "*Galilee of the nations*". In 733BC the peoples of the lands of Zebulun and Naphtali were taken into exile in Babylon by king Tigleth Pileser III. Babylon is described by Isaiah the prophet as the "*land of the shadow of death*" and the people are said "*to dwell in darkness*". Originally this famous prophecy of Isaiah about the great light shining in the dark was a prophecy about God delivering his people from exile and ending their suffering, "*making their gladness greater and their joy increase*". This also explains those words from Isaiah, "*the yoke that was weighing on them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, these you break*".

In the gospel today St Matthew uses this prophecy from Isaiah to demonstrate that the ministry which Jesus is embarking upon is also a deliverance for God's people from the darkness and slavery of sin and death. This is because with Jesus' coming "*the kingdom of heaven is close at hand*" which Jesus demonstrates "*by curing all kinds of diseases and sickness among the people*". What is required of the people is to "*repent*" and this is the message we should take away from today's gospel. Just as God delivered his people from the darkness and death of exile so now Jesus has come to deliver his people from the darkness of sin and death, but his people must mend their ways and make straight his paths by conversion and repentance. Repentance and conversion are the first message of Jesus as he embarks on his public ministry.

¹ Matt 4:1