Historical Commentary

Epiphany 3 / Year A

The Liturgy Letter

Commentary on Matthew 4:12-23 from Selected Church Fathers

Chrysostom: Why did he withdraw? He was serving as a pattern for us in instructing us not to seek out temptation but to withdraw ourselves from its sphere of influence. It is not a matter of reproach that one does not intentionally put oneself in danger. Yet one must stand nobly when one inadvertently falls into danger. So, to teach us this and to soothe the ire of the Jewish leaders, he withdrew to Capernaum, and in doing so he fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah.

Cyril of Alexandria: And the "great light" is Christ our Lord and the brightness of the gospel preaching. It is not, in fact, the law, which was likened to a lamp. For this reason a lamp always burned in the tabernacle, on account of the shortness of the law's rays, which had strength to extend their light only within the confines of the Jewish territories. Therefore the Gentiles were "in darkness," not having this lamplight.

Chromatius: The Evangelist commemorated in this passage the prophet's words: "Beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles: the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light." In what darkness? Certainly in the profound error of ignorance. What great light did they see? The light concerning which it is written: "He was the true light that illumines every- one who comes into this world." This was the light about which the just man Simeon in the Gospel declared, "A light of revelation to the Gentiles and a glory for your people Israel." That light had arisen according to what David had announced, saying, "A light has arisen in the darkness to the upright of heart." Also, Isaiah demonstrated that light about to come for the enlightenment of the church when he said, "Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you." Concerning that light also Daniel noted, "It reveals the profound and hidden things, knowing those things which are in darkness and the light is with it," that is, the Son with the Father, for even as the Father is light, so too is the Son light. And David also speaks in the psalm: "In your light shall we see light," for the Father is seen in the Son, as the Lord tells us in the Gospel: "Who sees me, sees the Father." From the true light, indeed, the true light proceeded, and from the invisible the visible. "He is the image of the invisible God," as the apostle notes.

Origen: He spoke of "the shadow of death" and not simply "death." This is because of the inability of sin utterly to corrupt the soul. Such complete corruption happens to bodies in death. But sin brings forth the shadow of death. And the words "light is sprung up" signify that it did not spring up upon us who were looking for it, but it shone upon those who were unprepared for it.

Chromatius: Concerning this light, the Evangelist points out in the present passage: "The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light." They see not with bodily contemplation—for the light is invisible—but with the eyes of faith and in the mind's eye. Therefore he says, "The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned." Therefore not only to those who were in darkness did this light appear, but he says that a light has arisen for those sitting in the region and shadow of death. This shows that there were others who were sitting in darkness—established in the region and shadow of death. And what is this region and shadow of death if not the region of the infernal abode, about which David speaks: "Even though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil, for you are with me"? He shall not fear any evil, that is, the punishments of hell. Therefore a saving light has arisen for those who are seated in the region and shadow of death, that is, Christ the Son of God who says in the Gospel: "I am the true light. He who follows me shall not walk in darkness." He who after his venerable and life-giving passion and death went down into the region of the infernal abode suddenly introduced the light of his majesty upon those who were shrouded in death, so that he might free those who were being held among the dead in expectation of his arrival, as the Lord himself in the person of Wisdom says through Solomon: "I will go down into the depths of the earth and gaze upon all those who are asleep, and I shall enlighten those who hope in God.

Chrysostom: "From that time." What time? After John was cast into prison. But why didn't he start preaching this from the beginning? What occasion did John provide? Didn't the witness of his works already make this proclamation? He began only at this time to preach in a public way, so that his unique divine identity might become recognized, of which the patriarchs and prophets had already spoken by way of anticipation, as in the voice of Zechariah: "And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High." And that he might leave no occasion for impetuous Pharisaic interpretations, he remarked, "For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.' But wisdom is proved right by her actions." It was necessary, furthermore, that he be correctly identified not by his own words alone but by another. Otherwise, even after so many and such powerful testimonies and demonstrations, they would merely dismiss him by saying "You are testifying on your own behalf; your testimony is not valid." If John had said nothing, and if Jesus had first come into their midst and testified only of himself, you can imagine what they would have said. So he did not preach publicly before John's coming, nor did he work miracles until John was cast into prison, lest the people be confused.

Chromatius: The voice of the Lord urging the people to repentance—the Holy Spirit made it known to the people that they might take heed, saying, "Today, when you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, as in the day of testing in the wilderness." In the same psalm above, he made clear that he was urging the sinful people to repentance and showed the state of a repentant soul, saying, "Come, let us fall down before him and lament before the Lord who made us, for he is our God." The Lord urges the people to repentance, and he promises to pardon their sins, according to Isaiah's words: "I, even I, am the one who wipes out your iniquities, and I will not be mindful of your sins. But you be mindful, declare first your iniquities that you may be justified." Rightly then does the Lord urge the people to repentance when he says, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand," so that through this confession of sins they may be made worthy to approach the kingdom of heaven. For no one can receive the grace of the

heavenly God unless one has been cleansed of every stain of sin by the confession of repentance, through the gift of the saving baptism of our Lord and Savior.

Gregory the Great: Someone may wonder: At the Lord's beckoning, what or how much did these two fishermen, who scarcely had anything, leave behind? On this, my beloved, we should attend to one's intention rather than one's wealth. That person has left behind a lot who keeps nothing for himself, who, though he has little, gives up everything. We tend to be attached to those things we own, and those things we scarcely own, we carefully hold on to. Therefore Peter and Andrew left much behind when they left behind covetousness and the very desire to own. That person has left much behind who renounces with the thing owned the very coveting of that thing. Therefore those poor who followed Jesus left behind just as much as those less poor who did not follow him but were able to covet. So when you notice that some have left a great deal behind, you need not say to yourself, I want to imitate those who disdain this world, but sorry, I have nothing to leave behind. You will leave much behind, my brothers, if you renounce earthly desires. External things, however small they may be, are sufficient for the Lord, since he looks at the heart and not at our material goods. Nor does he judge by how much is involved in our sacrifice but from how much it is made. For if we judge by external goods, our holy merchants traded in their nets and vessels for the perpetual life of the angels.

Chrysostom: But note both their faith and their obedience. For though they were in the midst of their work (and you know how time-consuming a chore fishing is), when they heard his command they did not delay or procrastinate. They did not say, "Let us return home, and talk things over with our family." Instead, "they left everything behind and followed," even as Elisha did when he followed Elijah. For Christ seeks this kind of obedience from us, such that we delay not even for a moment, though something absolutely most necessary should vehemently press in on us.

Gregory the Great: The kingdom of heaven has no price tag on it: It is worth as much as you have. For Zacchaeus it was worth half of what he owned, because the other half that he had unjustly pocketed he promised to restore fourfold. For Peter and Andrew it was worth the nets and vessel they had left behind; for the widow it was worth two copper coins; for another it was worth a cup of cold water. So, as we said, the kingdom of heaven is worth as much as you have.

Chromatius: Isaiah predicted this would happen when he said, "He himself took our infirmities and bore our sickness." To this end the teacher of life and heavenly physician Christ the Lord had come that by his direction he might educate people to life and with his heavenly medicine cure the sickness of body and soul, that he might free bodies beset by the devil and restore those persons afflicted by various infirmities to true and complete health. By the word of divine power he cured the weaknesses of the body, but by the medicine of heavenly teaching he healed the wounds of the soul. David clearly noted that the wounds of the soul are healed by God alone when he said, "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits," to which he added, "who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases." He is the true and perfect physician therefore who gives healing to the body and restores the soul to health: our Lord and Savior.