

Third Sunday after Epiphany

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Introduction

Jesus moves out of his comfort zone – Nazareth was home for most of his life, with his family and friends around him. He creates a new base in Capernaum in the border territory and Zebulun and Naphtali, on the North West shore of the sea of Galilee. Like so many border areas it was a contested space, with an unsettled history perpetually insecure and vulnerable to attack. The area of Galilee was under the rule of Herod Antipas, the Roman governor who had arrested John the Baptist. A hostile environment for a preacher of radical change.

Text

Matthew 4.12–23

Now when Jesus* heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the lake, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: ‘Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— 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.’ From that time Jesus began to proclaim, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’*

As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the lake—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, ‘Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.’ Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

Jesus* went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news* of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

Comment

Jesus begins his ministry in a land of deep darkness

Under the Roman Empire subjects were treated brutally, poverty and hunger were widespread, poor health and disease was commonplace. The local people were stripped of independence and any prospect of self-sufficiency and hope for a better future was erased. This was a land of deep darkness for the common people.

It was to this area that Jesus 'withdrew' – we probably wouldn't have used 'withdrew' to describe moving from the comfort of home to what for many was a hostile environment.

But Jesus choice was deliberate. Eight hundred years ago these lands, given to the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali, had become vassal states of the Assyrian Empire, so now this land, under a brutal Roman governor, was also a land of great darkness. Back then, Isaiah the prophet spoke of hope, of a new King who would restore peace, security, dignity and the restoration of a lost identity, so now with the commencement of Jesus mission, for those who sat in the region and shadow of darkness, a bright light was dawning.

Jesus identifies with the imprisoned Baptist

One can imagine that with the imprisonment of their leader, the disciples of John the Baptist would have been scared and I'm sure, kept a low profile. But not so Jesus. Jesus deliberately takes up where John left off. Jesus 'proclaims' his message to all and sundry, using the precise rhetorical catch phrase of John the Baptist himself, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.' By doing so Jesus is taking the side of the underdog, the prisoner, and takes a stance against those who through their abuse of power made others' lives a misery. Jesus is a prime example of 'speaking truth to power'.

Jesus calls disciples

Just as Jesus sided with the powerless prisoner John the Baptist, so we see Jesus moving among the common workers of his day, the fishermen. Simon and Andrew were casting their net for a catch and Jesus calls to them 'Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.' What was it they saw in Jesus? What did they understand in what Jesus had said? We don't know, but it was something strong, something wonderful, something as radical as light breaking through the darkness – and they wanted more. They were fishermen, and they wouldn't have much prospect of changing that status or position. But Jesus was saying to them, You do not need to be locked in! I will make you fish for people!! In a context where hope had been locked down, here was the chance of breaking free. 'Immediately they left their nets...'

Further down the shore James and John were in a boat with Zebedee mending their nets and Jesus called them too. They left their father Zebedee in the boat and followed Jesus. I imagine that Zebedee was amazed, but also glad, here was something he could have never given his boys, but with this new Rabbi, and the sense of hope he was generating, how wonderful that his sons had the opportunity of sharing in that.

Jesus message wasn't just words

Jesus went where people were, anywhere they could listen he also taught in the synagogues. Jesus spoke of 'good news' of the kingdom with conviction and sincerity, but he not only spoke of good news, healing demonstrated the good news to the sick, disabled, the marginalized, the helpless. Through the good news of healing the sick were restored to their families, their work, their place in the community as valuable and fully contributing participants. Their dignity was restored in every aspect of their humanity. How good is that 'good news'.

The kingdom of heaven is revealed when life reflects the world as God intended it to be.

In Jesus words and healings, the kingdom of heaven had come near, meaning the kingdom was accessible – accessible even to the sick, the marginalized, the powerless, the forgotten ones.

Response

a) Can our preaching of repentance be too negative? Surely 'Repentance' is 'good news' to the marginalized and oppressed. If 'Repent' means 'change your mind', 'change your direction in life' this is 'Good News' to those who feel trapped in the status quo, robbed of hope and find it too painful to dream that life could be different! Change your mind, hope is possible!

b) What are the blessings we have witnessed in recent years that have moved our world closer to what God intends it to be?

Would you include

- The Declaration of Human Rights
- The affirmation of women's dignity and right to equal treatment
- The struggle for independence in former colonies
- Sharing of gifts between different churches, religions and faith
- The breakdown of all forms of racial discrimination
- The recognition of the rights of children.
- Greater equality for LGBT+?

c) What are the recent signs of 'good news' for our world that have been championed by the Christian Churches?

d) Jesus in announcing 'Good News' is clearly in conflict with the status quo of his time and place. Are you, and is our Church, too complacent about our world in how we interpret what it means to be witness to the Kingdom of Heaven?

Prayer

Creator God, who saw what was made and named it 'good'
In Jesus, You revealed to us what love looks like in our time and in our world
As we repent and accept the Good News of your Kingdom
Liberate us from our complacency,
so that in our words and actions
we may more closely reflect your will for your world,
and in the dark world of the marginalized, oppressed and burdened
The Light of Hope may dawn,
Through Jesus Christ our Lord

Amen