

Sunday 26 January 2014 – third after Epiphany

Isaiah 9:1-4; Psalm 27:1,4-9; 1 Corinthians 1:10-18; Matthew 4:12-23

Introduction to readings:

Isaiah 9

Zebulun and Naphtali – tribes in the north, west of Sea of Galilee. When Isaiah was writing, in the time of king Ahaz, Judah had faced the threat of attack from Syria and Israel in the north, because they wanted Judah to join them in an alliance against the waning superpower Assyria. But Assyria attacked and conquered the tribes in northern Israel, particularly Zebulun and Naphtali, and took them away into exile. Isaiah sees a time when God will bring light into the darkness of conquest.

1 Corinthians 1

Corinth at crossroads of ancient world, large mixed population. In the introduction read last week, Paul reminded the Christians in Corinth that they were called to be holy, to be saints, set apart by God for God's good purpose, and gifted by God with riches in speech and knowledge. Yet we know that those very gifts of speech and knowledge had become points of division and discord among the Corinthians. Paul has stressed that it is God who is faithful, God who has called them into the fellowship of his Son, God who will strengthen them until the end – and now he begins to tackle the issues that the community is currently dealing with.

Matthew 4

Since our last reading in Matthew, Jesus' baptism, Jesus has been led into the desert by the Spirit and there tempted by the devil. We will come back to that story at the beginning of Lent, on 9 March. But now we move on to the beginning of Jesus' ministry, and hear Matthew's account of the call of the first disciples.

Sermon

When Jesus began his ministry, Matthew tells us, he headed for Galilee, the territory characterised in Isaiah's prophecy as “a land of deep darkness.” It was certainly a place on the margins, far from the centre of political and religious power. From the Assyrian invasion in 7th century until 2nd century, it was under Gentile control, and in Jesus' day there was still a large Gentile population there. Galilee was a very fertile region, and had become home to many Greek and Roman retired soldiers, who controlled much of the local economy. Burdensome yokes of high taxation and exploitation, the rod of foreign oppressors and their puppet rulers lay heavily on the ordinary people.

Take the fishing industry as one example – fishing¹ was firmly under Roman control, with fish claimed as revenue for the empire. Fishing cooperatives purchased a lease from Rome's agents that allowed them to fish and also required them to supply a certain quantity of fish to the market. Taxes were levied on what was caught and what was processed, as well as on transportation. The only ones who benefited under this system were the tax collectors, and Herod Antipas the Jewish puppet king, and the emperor. Those who did the fishing ranked very low on the social ladder, and very little of the benefits of their work trickled down to them. Fishing was a socially inferior and economically precarious existence – fishermen suffered from the burdensome yoke, the oppressive rod.

But Isaiah long ago had spoken of a time when the people who lived under such oppression, who lived in such deep darkness would see a great light; when light would shine on them and they would rejoice. When Jesus moved back into Galilee, into this marginalised, despised territory, Matthew saw that God was at work, bringing light into darkness, bringing liberation to people who were oppressed and overlooked.

Jesus had been baptised by John the Baptist, and now John was in prison, arrested by Herod Antipas, the tetrarch, Roman client ruler. When Jesus headed back to Galilee, it was not a withdrawal but rather a confrontation.

And Jesus picked up John's key message – “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near”. To repent

¹ Carter, W *Matthew and the Margins*, p121

means to change your mind, to turn around and head in another direction, to turn back. Jesus was proclaiming something new and different, good news for people under threat, light for people living in darkness.

Nancy Rockwell puts it this way:

In the life of the people, in synagogue and in churches, the ritual prayer has always been: *Someday you will come to us, O Lord*. Jesus goes from town to town proclaiming, *Now*. The ritual story has always been: *You were with us, O God, and we sinned. You departed, and we are ashamed, waiting for you to forgive and heal our misery*. Jesus preaches differently: *Turn away from the old understanding – now is the time of God's loving kindness, mercy, justice, new beginnings, and joy*.²

John the Baptist had followed the pattern of most religious teachers of his time, attracting disciples to him, who would come and ask if they could follow him and learn from him –
But Jesus did it differently. Jesus took the initiative and called those whom he wanted to be his disciples. They did not choose him: he chose them and called them to follow.

In Matthew's account there is no mention of a prior relationship between Jesus and the four fishermen, Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John. Which isn't to say that there was none – last week we heard from John's gospel that Andrew had been a disciple of John who had gone to find out more about Jesus, and who then had shared with his brother Simon what he had discovered.³

But for Matthew's purposes, what is important is Jesus' call and the effect it had. Jesus called his first disciples as they went about their everyday lives, as they worked at their trade. He called them to a new task, a new life, to fish for people.

Have you ever thought about the picture that conjures up – a net being hauled in, and out through the gaps in the netting arms and legs, elbows and feet wriggling and squirming.... it's a very funny image.

But such an image underlines what is at the heart of Jesus' call: it is people, it is people, it is people. This is not a call to learn a new doctrine or to follow a new set of rules – it is a call to a new relationship with Jesus, with one another and with people. But fishing is not a solitary enterprise, not this sort of fishing, and Jesus begins his ministry by calling into being a community of disciples. Remember this comes immediately after Jesus' solitary forty days of testing in the desert. How isolated did Jesus feel? Then there had been the news that John Baptist had been arrested. And when Jesus moved into Galilee, he went not to his home town of Nazareth, but to Capernaum on the banks of lake Galilee. Little surprise then that Jesus began his ministry by establishing a community around him, people who would be with him, learn from him, support him.

This new community cut across family relationships and work commitments, established patterns of responsibility and obligation. In a culture where family and kinship was the basis of status and honour and identity, Jesus' disciples leave all that behind them as they respond to the call and follow Jesus. This is no optional-extra to life-as-normal – Jesus is creating a new community, within which to live out a new life with new priorities and new relationships.

In Paul's letter to the Corinthians we hear something of how that worked out in practice in the early church. Doesn't it all sound rather familiar? - the divisions and factions that develop within any community, including the Christian community.

But Paul's plea is for unity within the church in Corinth, unity of mind and purpose. We know that the church there in Corinth was diverse ethnically and economically, culturally and spiritually. Paul had reminded them that they were called to be saints, to be holy⁴ - but divisions and dissension had appeared, as people clustered around particular leaders, presumably because of their teaching or their effectiveness or their charisma. Paul wanted the Christians in Corinth to remember that their unity was found in Christ – Christ who was crucified for them, Christ into whose name they were baptised.

2 <http://biteintheapple.com/a-thousand-tongues/>

3 John 1:29-42

4 1 Corinthians 1:2

It is the cross of Christ which is to stand at the centre of the Christian community – the cross which is foolishness, weakness, and yet the power of God. The cross of Christ is the mark of sacrificial love, of God's complete self-giving and of Christ's total identification with our human condition. The cross is weakness and vulnerability and failure in the face of the power of violence and coercion and domination – and yet it is the power of God which overcomes violence and coercion and the destructive power of death itself. The community centred on the cross will be marked by cross-like characteristics, refusing to be coerced by violence, seeking to serve rather than being served, loving to the uttermost,

And in baptism we become one with Christ, dying with him and being raised to new life. But equally, in baptism we are born into the family of God, the body of Christ, the new community which Jesus has called and formed around himself. The unity that Paul was calling for was the unity of brothers and sisters of Christ and in Christ. What family resemblance is to be found in the Christian community? Do people look at us and say “Oh, but you are just like your big brother?”

Jesus called the first disciples into a new community, into relationship - with himself, with each other, and with all the different people they would meet over the next few years and, indeed, the rest of their lives.

Matthew's Gospel ends, remember, with another invitation to relationship: to make disciples by baptizing them and teaching them what Jesus had taught them.

Jesus issues the same call to us - to be in genuine real relationships with the people around us, and to be in those relationships the way Jesus was and is in relationship with his disciples and with us: bearing each other's burdens, caring for each other and especially the vulnerable, holding onto each other through thick and thin, always with the hope and promise of God's abundant grace.

Sometimes that call - to be in Christ-shaped relationship with others - will take us far from home, leaving behind everything that is familiar and comfortable and safe - and sometimes it will take shape in and among the people right around us. But that call will always involve people - those people who happen to be all around us and especially those who are in need.⁵

So think now of Jesus' call to you to come and follow him, and to fish for people.

Can you think of one person, right where you are now, whom you know, whom you work with or travel with or care for or even try to avoid? Your relationship with them may bring you joy, or sorrow, or frustration, or hope. Take a moment now to pray for that person ...

Over the coming week, I invite you to continue to pray for that person, when they come to mind, or when you meet them, and as you pray, believe that God's call to you means that you will make a difference in the life of the person for whom you pray.

⁵ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3018>