

Matthew 4:12-23

Isaiah 9:1-4

9:1 But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

9:2 The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness on them light has shined.

9:3 You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder.

9:4 For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.

Matthew 4:12-23

4:12 Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee.

4:13 He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali,

4:14 so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

4:15 "Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles

4:16 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."

4:17 From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

4:18 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 sea for they were fishermen.

4:19 And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people."

4:20 Immediately they left their nets and followed him.

4:21 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.

4:22 Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

4:23 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.

Among the Gospels in the New Testament, the Gospel of Matthew, as I have certainly said before, places a great deal of emphasis on the Jewishness of Jesus. Jesus is presented as the ultimate fulfilment of the Jewish scriptures in over a dozen fulfilment citations. We have one of these in our reading from Isaiah -

Matthew's gospel is written for a Jewish Christian audience living within the immediate proximity of the homeland and undergoing difficult times - the continuity with the faith of Abraham continued through the work and ministry of Jesus is important to stress.

This is the background then which explains Matthew's emphasis. The Jesus we encounter here is a Jesus at the start of his serious ministry, calling to him those who will accompany him over the next few years. Jesus has heard that John has been arrested (we know that the writing is on the wall for John the Baptist) and so Jesus runs away from immediate danger to embrace a nomadic life of preaching, teaching, healing, helping...

It is worth noting also that the story that this follows on from is the story of Jesus' temptation by the devil in the wilderness. Had Jesus given in to the promise of power and prestige on offer there so much would have been different. The fact that he resists sends a clear message about what his ministry will look like - it will be a ministry to the weakest and least powerful, to those who will not be able to help him when he is in trouble, to those who are desperate and have no resources. Jesus will not be taking on the oppressive Roman authorities, he will rather be helping their victims, those they have cast into darkness.

Jesus therefore sets about spreading the light that has been promised by the prophet Isaiah, shining in the darkness, and, crucially, encouraging others to shine too. As we hear later in the Gospels Jesus is very often hindered rather than helped by his disciples - he could surely quite easily have done his work without them - but he insists that they be part of it all. Jesus' leadership style is one that encourages others to try and grow, make mistakes, learn from those mistakes or, quite often, fail to do so and make the same mistakes again, fall, pick themselves up...fall again...

The fact that Jesus calls disciples who are fishermen to 'fish for men or people' is an interesting one - we tend to think of this as a convenient metaphor for evangelism but isn't it a strange one? These fishermen, after all, would have killed the fish they caught, there is considerable violence involved, hooking their mouths maybe, bashing their heads against rocks, catching them up panicked and struggling in nets - is that really the best metaphor for how we should communicate Jesus to others? (Actually some evangelists do leave you feeling you have been bashed over the head...) Wouldn't it have been easier if Simon and Andrew had been bakers (lots of nice images of 'bakers of people' - kneading, forming, transforming from lumps of dough into life-giving bread, or if they had been builders (builders of people, turning people into doors, windows) - but no, they are fishermen...

Perhaps it isn't so much about a metaphor or about the fact that the fishing metaphor has been conveniently and unquestioningly used...perhaps their profession is not what is important here. I am more inclined to believe that what we are talking about here is a democratic kind of inclusivity - something that is so often difficult for modern Christians. Jesus calls Simon and Andrew, James and John to come and follow him - they happen to be fishermen and so they can 'fish for people' and the rest of us, all of us whom Jesus calls to come and follow him, will be in other professions, and we can do that for Jesus. What is important is to hear Jesus calling, to come to him and to follow him and then, whoever we are, whatever we do, that is what Jesus will use as part of our calling, our following - once I decide to follow Jesus then I become an interpreter or a theologian for people, an interpreter or a theologian for Jesus. So some of you might be teachers, business people, nurses, students, accountants, retired people, unemployed people - whatever your occupational status - Jesus wants to use you and all that you are for his work. Jesus isn't just interested in those who can fish for people, he is interested in each one of us with our unique and individual skills, our failures and our successes, all our life experiences, everything that has gone into making us who we are - all the good and all the bad. Jesus takes it all, takes us all out of the darkness and shines his light. And we are never the same again.

So perhaps the most important thing about this passage where Jesus calls his disciples to fish for people, is that Jesus meets people where they are, in the daily round of life, doing the things they do every day. You don't have to give up those things you do every day (I'm pretty sure the disciples

kept on fishing and certainly, after Jesus' crucifixion they go straight back to it), you just have to do what you do for Jesus - that is what makes all the difference.

Any time I read about the lives of Jesus' disciples when they were with him it really cheers me up, because they are such a mixed ability group, they make so many mistakes, they completely misunderstand Jesus' mission and the form it will take, they deny and betray and fall asleep on the job, they don't listen well, they give up easily - and yet Jesus calls them - doesn't that reassure you?

Jesus talks about repentance, the Greek for that 'metanoia' implies change, transformation - it shouldn't be a miserable thing to repent, but a positive decision to live differently, to work differently, to change the focus or the direction of our gaze. It also doesn't have to be a one-time thing - it can be an ongoing process, not necessarily changing what we do but how we do it, or for whom we do it. It's exciting work because it involves healing, helping, bringing good news of great joy, shining light in the darkness - who wouldn't want to be a part of that, as a fisherman, an accountant, an interpreter, a parent...

This week, whatever you find yourself doing, listen for the voice of Jesus calling, look up from your work and meet his gaze - and then join him: take your work, your life, and join it with his...worth a try perhaps?

Jesus says - come, follow me, I will make all of you my disciples, I will include all of you in my healing work. I just want people who will hear me, change and follow, who will love and heal. Whoever you are and whatever you do - come, follow, serve and live.
Amen.