The Call of the King
Matthew 4:12-25

Last Sunday we saw how Jesus stood against the devil's temptation, and that passage ended with the words, 'then the devil left him' (Matt 4:11). But just because an enemy disengages on one front, does not mean he's gone away, does it? Because the next thing we read, v12, is 'Now when [Jesus] heard that John had been arrested…'

So the enemy has failed to take Jesus out, so instead he takes John the Baptist out, and Herod imprisons him. So whilst Jesus won the battle of the wilderness, the war is far from over. It's a reminder, isn't it, that whilst you might win a specific victory over temptation in your own life, you can never drop your guard.

But now Matthew tells us, that with John side-lined, Jesus' life enters a new phase. John prepared the way, but now Jesus is going to take centre stage. And if you know anything of the region at the time, where he chooses to start his ministry is, frankly, surprising, because Matthew says, v 12, Jesus, 'withdrew into Galilee.'

The State We're In

Now I grew up on the South Coast of England. And a few miles inland there's a line of hills, called the South Downs – now we call them hills, but in comparison to the Alps, they're barely pimples. Beautiful, but pimples. But anything north of the Downs we considered *up north*, and you didn't want to go there. And that was how the religious and cultural elite in Jerusalem, viewed these Galilean northerners. They looked down on them. But that was more than just geographical snobbery.

You see, when Israel first entered the Promised Land, they divided it up according to their tribes. And this area of Galilee was given to the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali. And it was this area, in the years around 720BC, that was decimated by the invading Assyrian empire. Listen to how 2 Kings puts it: 'In the days of Pekah king of Israel, Tiglath-pileser king of Assyria came and captured… Gilead, and Galilee, all the land of Naphtali, and he carried the people captive to Assyria' (2 Kings 15:29). Now the Assyrians were brutal. They waged war like ISIS, just on a far greater scale. And in response to Israel's idolatry and faithlessness, God gave Israel into their hands, and it was Galilee, and Zebulun and Naphtali, who were the first to experience that.

But the Assyrians didn't just deport or murder the population, as a weapon of war they resettled other, non-Jewish, people groups into the area. And so over time Galilee became this mixed Jewish and non-Jewish region. As Matthew quotes from Isaiah the prophet here in v15, it became 'Galilee of the Gentiles', and that wasn't meant as a complement. And people spoke Greek rather than Aramaic; and pagan religious customs were practised alongside Jewish ones, and their rulers were gentiles.

But its population wasn't just ethnically mixed, it was also dense. The land and fishing industry around the Sea of Galilee had made the region prosperous. And it's estimated that up to 3 million people lived in the area.

And so it's to here, this ethnically mixed, morally compromised Galilee, one of the most densely populated areas in the Middle East, that Jesus goes. Matthew says he 'withdrew' there, but this is no retreat is it. The region that was the first to experience God's judgement hundreds of years before, is about to be the first to experience his redemption.

And Matthew sees the significance of all this. And in v14 he quotes from the prophet Isaiah, chapter 9, that Jesus goes to Galilee: 'so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: "The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles – the people living in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned."'

Now, last Friday night Naomi woke me in the middle of the night, to tell me some of her young girl scouts were in trouble in the Jura. They were sleeping in a refuge, but because of a thunderstorm 4 guys were trying to get into the refuge and the girls were terrified and could we go up and help them. And so at 2.30 in the morning, in the wind and the rain I found myself driving up an unmade track, up the mountain side, through the forest, until we couldn't go any further, because of a fallen rock in the way, and then getting out to hike up the last 500m to the refuge. And it was as I turned the car headlights off and got out of the car that we realised neither of us had a torch. And it was dark. No moon, no street lights, no lightening. We couldn't see a thing.

And that is how Isaiah and Matthew describe the people of Galilee: verse 16, 'The people dwelling in darkness.' Now, at one level, that darkness could just refer to the horrors of the Assyrian invasion couldn't it? The darkness of a land decimated by war. But that was hundreds of years ago. Galilee is prosperous and peaceful now, and yet, according to Matthew, they are a people living in darkness, as if they spent their days stumbling around in the darkness of the Jura at 2am on a stormy night – a people who dwell 'in the region and shadow of death' (Matt 4:16).

So, if it's not the darkness of oppression and war, what is it? What is it that robs these people of light? Well, there's a darkness that comes with ignorance, isn't there? When someone doesn't know what's going on, when they don't know what they need to know, you say they're 'being kept in the dark'. And if the people of Galilee, for all their cosmopolitan society, did not know God, then it's no wonder Matthew says that, for all the beauty of the area, a deep darkness lies over it.

But there's also a darkness that comes from sin, isn't there? You might say of someone, 'they're pretty dark.' Meaning, it's not a pleasant experience being around them. Now what is that? It's an absence of goodness, isn't it? A lack of some kind of moral light, and it casts a dark shadow that can be chilling.

And then there's fear. Fears don't just multiply and breed in the dark, fear itself brings a shadow into life, doesn't it – and especially the fear of death.

Now you might hear all that and think, 'well thank goodness that's not me – that I live this side of the 'enlightenment'!' Except the apostle Paul suggests otherwise. When he's talking about the change Jesus brings about in a person's life he describes their pre-conversion, pre-Jesus status, as living under 'the domain of darkness' (Col 1:13). That for all our sophistication, we're all Galileans really; even in our own multi-cultural, cosmopolitan, enlightened West. Because, like them we too stumble in the darkness of ignorance, not knowing God. Like them we know the darkness of sin, and our lives or marriages or families are blighted by it. And whilst we seemingly have everything, we can find ourselves becoming anxious about a whole load of things – and so like them we too know the darkness of fear and worry.

And yet, Matthew says, it was to just such people, that Jesus came: v16, quoting Isaiah: 'The people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned.' And if you know Isaiah 9, you'll know that that light dawns in the coming of a Son: 'The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light… For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace' (Is 9:2,6).

So dawn is going to break, the darkness will be dispelled, when this Son comes Isaiah says. And Matthew says, and he's come – and he's come for people like us who need light. Which is why he comes with a message.

Called to Turn

Now, Jesus and John the Baptist were pretty different. But however much they differed in style, or personality, their message was the same. Verse 17, 'From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."'

Now, don't you think it's interesting that Jesus calls people to repent? You see today, in our age of so-called tolerance, there's an accepted dogma that unless I'm hurting someone else, you cannot tell me that my lifestyle is wrong. And people persuade themselves that Jesus would never have criticised anyone's lifestyles, because that's so judgemental. That he would never say that the way someone was living their life was wrong. That how we use our money, or spend our time, or how we consume stuff, or express our sexuality, or the ambitions that we pursue, that these have nothing to say about the state of our hearts, and Jesus would never have been so bigoted as to go there.

And yet Jesus begins his ministry by walking into the dark room of our lives, turning on the light and saying, 'repent'. Which means Jesus is assuming something pretty fundamental. He is taking for granted that these Galileans, and you and I, are walking in the wrong direction, that the bent of our hearts and lives is away from God, that it's displeasing to him, and that we need to turn around. Because that's what 'repent' means: to totally change the direction of your life. That rather than stumble away from God in the darkness, we need to turn around, away from our sin, and towards the light.

So Jesus doesn't come, and say 'what you need is to make a few minor adjustments in your life; what you need is to be a bit more spiritual, and find balance in your life; what you need is to improve yourself in this area and boost your self-confidence.' No, he says, 'the kingdom of God is at hand, the king has come, and what you need is radical, 180 degree change. You need to leave the darkness and come walk in the light.'

And when you do that for the first time, Paul says a radical shift of identity, a radical change in nationality, occurs: Colossians 1:13, 'He [God] has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son'.

And yet, whilst the Christian life begins with that initial repentance, it doesn't end there.

Called to Follow

Now, in Jesus day, if you wanted to become a disciple of a rabbi, you chose your rabbi. You did the picking. But here it's Jesus who does the choosing, v18-19, 'While walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother… And he said to them, "Follow me."'

Now, we know from John's gospel that these guys have known Jesus for about a year – so this is not the adult version of taking sweets from strangers – this isn't the first time they've met him. But this *is* the first time Jesus calls them so clearly and deliberately, to follow him. Now, before this, did they oscillate between fishing and Jesus, debating among themselves, shall we fish, or shall we follow? We don't know. What we do know is that this day came when Christ called them to commitment.

Because the call to follow Jesus is always a call to a radical commitment of your life. It's the call to let Christ, and your relationship with him, become the thing that defines you. That from now on it's not going to be your job – fishing for them, or your family, or your nationality, or your politics, or your education, or your marital status, or your sexuality that defines you, but Christ. You see, this call to follow Jesus is the call to have your life fundamentally shaped by him. To have his priorities become your priorities. To have his character shape your character. So that when those moments come when you are tempted to anger or to lash out – he influences how you respond. Or when life is hard and things are not going your way, it's him who shapes how you react. It means to have the natural bent of your life, to think that life is centred on you, changed by him, and now rather than live for your glory, you live for his, and for others' good.

And there lies the difference between an admirer of Jesus and a disciple of Jesus. I wonder which one you are. An admirer likes what he hears and sees of Jesus, but it doesn't cost him anything. An admirer stands nearby and enjoys the glow, but he never takes up the cross of self-denial or sacrifice or service. The admirer talks warmly of Jesus but there's no life laid down in radical obedience. It doesn't cost you anything to be an admirer of Jesus. But it costs you everything to be a disciple.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor, who was hanged for his resistance to Hitler, wrote a book called the Cost of Discipleship. Listen to what he says: "The cross is laid on every Christian. The first Christ-suffering, which every man must experience, is the call to abandon the attachments of this world. It is that dying of the old man which is the result of his encounter with Christ… When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."

You see, when Christ calls you to follow him, it can never be business as usual can it? It wasn't for these four fishermen, it wasn't for Matthew, a tax collector, it wasn't for Bonhoeffer and it won't be for you. Life is forever changed when Jesus says, 'follow me'. The old you has to die. You have to say goodbye to the you that lived for yourself. And here Matthew tells us, v20, 'Immediately *they left their nets* and followed him.' Then in v22 he says of James and John that, 'Immediately *they left the boat and their father* and followed him.' But it's not just the nets, boats and family they leave behind, is it? It's everything those things symbolise. They are saying goodbye to a whole way of life. A life of stability and security and relative prosperity.

And following Jesus will, and must, radically alter your relationship with money, and comfort and what you deem success. It must radically alter how you view the plaudits, or the criticisms, of the world. Like these first disciples, there is going to be stuff, or security, or relationships that you too will be called to give up either when you first become a Christian or in the years that follow.

But when you know what Christ has given up for you, you won't recoil at the cost, you'll embrace it. Because when you look at Christ's cross you know that no one has ever given up anything for Christ that compares with what Christ has given up for you.

Called to a Task

You see, when Jesus called these men, it wasn't to be sermon fodder, was it? It wasn't so that they just sat and listened but never *did*. Verse 19, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." So following Jesus is going to result in a change, not just in their characters, but in what they do with their lives. That the message was not going to end with Jesus, but that God would use them to bring others into his kingdom.

And of course, what was true for these first disciples is true for every subsequent disciple, isn't it? At the end of this gospel Matthew records Jesus saying to these same men, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations… teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matt 28:19-20). So, if you're a Christian, their call to mission is your call to mission.

And here we get a glimpse of Jesus' mission that he calls them to. Verse 23-24, 'And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people. So his fame spread.'

Do you see the three things? Teaching, Proclaiming, Healing – and his fame spread.

So Jesus taught the gospel of the kingdom. The good news that God's rule and reign has broken into our world, it's come close to our lives, and so everyone must decide where their loyalties lie – which king will you serve. And Jesus taught that. And after he returned to heaven, his disciples carried on teaching it. And now, if you're a Christian, as he gives you opportunity, he calls you to do the same: to explain to friends and colleagues and neighbours and family – this is what the good news is. And if you are intimidated at the thought of that, don't be. Jesus is used to taking very ordinary people, like these four guys, and doing something extraordinary with them. And remember, ultimately, as someone else has said, all you are is one beggar telling another beggar where he can find bread.

Secondly, Jesus proclaimed it. And if teaching appeals to the mind, proclaiming the gospel appeals to the heart. But to speak to someone else's heart, you've got to first know this gospel in your own heart, haven't you? And you know how Christ is the answer to your sin and guilt and shame; how he's the answer to your fears and anxieties; how he's the answer to your pride and your poor self image. And when you know that, you don't need to stand at the front. You don't need a degree in theology, but from your heart you can speak to others' hearts that Jesus really is good news. And you'll speak, not out of guilt, or obligation, but out of the joy that comes from really knowing him.

But thirdly he healed. Because with Jesus it is head and heart and body. And Matthew says he healed, 'every disease and every affliction among the people' (v23). Notice that word, *every*. So no sickness and no infirmity can resist the presence of Jesus, because in him the kingdom of God has come and is coming, and no remnants of the fall can remain where he reigns. And what we see happening here in Galilee is just a foretaste of that day when everything will be made new in his kingdom.

And we long for a day like that, don't we? I mean, don't you look out on the world, or at the brokenness of people's lives, maybe even your own life, and wish it were different. And inside you know there should be, there has to be something better than this. It's the longing for God's kingdom and it's in Jesus that it comes. And for now it's partial, but one day it will come fully. And he calls these men and you and me to be a part of that.

So as Jesus taught us, pray for its coming: 'Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.' And pray for the sick. Will you see what Jesus sees here? No, because you're not Jesus, but we won't see anything unless we pray. And care for the suffering, and show mercy to the struggling, because you know that Jesus has shown you mercy.

So, when Christ calls you, it is a call to leave the darkness behind and follow him. And it's a call to be an ambassador. An ambassador for the king and an outpost of his kingdom.