

Scripture Reading for January 26 2020

Isaiah 9:1-3,6-7 (NIV)

⁹ Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the nations, by the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan—²The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. ³You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as warriors rejoice when dividing the plunder.

⁶ For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. ⁷ Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.

Matthew 4:12-25 (NIV)

¹² When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he withdrew to Galilee. ¹³ Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali— ¹⁴ to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah:

¹⁵ "Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—¹⁶the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned."¹

¹⁷ From that time on Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

¹⁸ As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. ¹⁹ "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people." ²⁰ At once they left their nets and followed him.

²¹ Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, ²² and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

²³ Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. ²⁴ News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed; and he healed them. ²⁵ Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him.

¹ Isaiah 9:1,2.

Sermon: “Follow Me and Fish for People”

This last week, “Harry” – as we are now to call him – made, as he put it, a “step of faith.” He made, along with his wife, Meghan, a momentous decision to cease being high-profile Royals and to follow a different path. In a speech this last week, Harry said he wants to continue a life of service, but in a very different way. He felt he had “no choice” but was somehow *compelled* to make this decision; “there was no other option,” he said. We have all heard of the phrase, taking “a step (or a leap) of faith,” and we *all* take such steps – whether we admit to that or not. The reason why is simple and obvious: *we do not know the future*. When Harry and Meghan met and married, their trajectory in life was fairly predictable – in terms of being a part of the Royal family. Harry had been raised that way, just like his brother, William, and all Royals before them. Leaving that “bubble” into the unknown is a *huge* step of faith for them - a leap into *uncertainty* - and of course, I wish them both well. We too make “steps of faith” into the unknown; we choose our education options and career paths; we also can fall in love and get married. And because none of us know the future, we can never know the long-term consequences of the choices we make.

In our Gospel reading today, Matthew presents us with his brief account of Jesus’ call of his first disciples: Simon, Andrew, James, and John. And like Harry and Meghan, those men each took a huge step of faith, leaving their stable jobs to – in this case - follow an unknown man on a mission.² And the way Matthew presents it, these first disciples *also* felt *compelled* by Christ’s call – there was no other option but “*at once* they left their nets and their families and followed Jesus.”³ Jesus tells these fishermen, “You’ll be catching people now,”⁴ without really explaining what that meant. Did they realise that, within a few years, their master would be dead - killed on the orders of Pontius Pilate? No, of course they didn’t. They didn’t know the destination; they followed Jesus and learned along the way.

Let’s pause in the story for a moment and backtrack a little to the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. Matthew suggests that bad news of John the Baptist’s arrest⁵ was the trigger for Jesus to start preaching his “good news.”⁶ Jesus withdraws from Nazareth⁷ and makes his new base in Capernaum,⁸ next to the Sea

² Contrast this call narrative with Luke 5:1-11 where the call *follows* a miraculous catch of fish (and with Mark 1:16-20; John 1:29-51). For Luke, Jesus *already* had a reputation (Luke 4:37,40) *before* he called his first disciples. See also:

<https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Who-is-Jesus-Come-and-See.pdf> and: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Come-Follow-Me-For-the-Time-is-Now.pdf> .

³ Matt 4:20, 22. The words “at once” and “immediately” carry a force of compulsion! Leaving the family livelihood is no small thing, especially if they were the oldest sons (like Jesus) and expected to continue the family business.

⁴ Matt 4:17.

⁵ The Greek word translated “put in prison” (NIV) or “arrested” (NRSV) means “hand over” or “deliver up” and is the same word used for Judas’ act of betrayal. This is literary hint or allusion to what is to come for Jesus too.

⁶ Matt 4:12,17. Note, there is no indication as to how much time has passed between Matt 4:16 and 17. (Curiously, John’s gospel presents the ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus as initially occurring in parallel.)

⁷ Luke 4:14-30 indicates that Jesus was rejected at Nazareth and that is why he left. (Compare/contrast with Mark 6:1–6.)

⁸ Matt 9:1.

of Galilee and the hometown of Peter and Andrew.⁹ Galilee, in those days, was a mixture of Jewish and Gentile cultures, and Capernaum was in the territory of the Old Testament tribe of Naphtali.¹⁰ Matthew connects this move with an oracle from Isaiah¹¹ that portrays the *kind* of ministry Jesus will have together with his *authority*. Remember that Matthew has *already* described the *divine endorsement* of Christ's ministry with the voice from heaven at his baptism, along with his powerful anointing by the Holy Spirit.¹² Isaiah's prophecy, which was our Old Testament reading, hints that Jesus' ministry is ultimately for *both* Jews and non-Jews.¹³ It also reiterates what Matthew has just proclaimed, that "God's authority rests upon the shoulders of Jesus," and he *will* establish "a [Davidic] *kingdom* of justice and righteousness."¹⁴ So, with those words of the prophet ringing in the readers ears, Matthew states that once John the Baptist was arrested, Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the *kingdom* of heaven has come near,"¹⁵ which is *exactly* the same message of John the Baptist¹⁶ and shows that the starting point of Christ's message is in continuity with that of John's. It is therefore as God's *authorized herald* that Jesus comes to Galilee on a mission to bring God's "light to the nations."¹⁷

The word "kingdom" can be confusing because to Jews at the time interpreted that in terms of a *geographical* territory. And we can be confused today as "kingdom of heaven" sounds other-worldly, whereas it really means the "kingdom of God" – as the other gospel writers make crystal clear.¹⁸ So the proclamation that God's kingdom has "come near" does *not* mean that Jesus is telling them the way to get to 'heaven' when you die! No, it about God's active rule coming - as the Lord's Prayer puts it - "on earth as it is in heaven."¹⁹ As Matthew will later explain in his gospel, this is a *temporal* statement, *not* a geographical one; it refers all those who want to be ruled by Jesus the Messiah from that day until Christ returns and completes what he began. Jesus will therefore *redefine* those ancient Jewish

⁹ Matt 8:5, 14.

¹⁰ Technically, Nazareth was in the territory of Zebulun, so this does not instantly align with Matthew's point. It is possible that the border between Zebulun and Asher's territory was blurred by Matthew's day and so perhaps he thought that Nazareth was in Asher. The long history of oppression in this region (Assyrian exile) makes this an appropriate place for Jesus' ministry. This agriculturally fertile region suffered heavy taxation by the Romans and the people were oppressed and marginalized from the center of political power. The liberating "good news" of Jesus would have had a receptive audience.

¹¹ Matthew blends Isa 9:1-2 with Isa 42:6-7. The mention of "darkness/light" and "sitting" (NRSV) is important. And one can't read Isa 9:1-2 without linking it to 6-7! (A possible reason for Jesus leaving the region is because he is *not* seeking a direct confrontation the political powers that arrested John. See also [7].)

¹² Matt 3:16-17; 12:18 This is reinforced by the *angels* ministering to Jesus after the temptations in the wilderness, 4:11b.

¹³ "Galilee of Gentiles" (Matt 4:15) is so called because historically the region was *surrounded* by non-Jewish peoples. (Isaiah's oracle was from the time of the Assyrian exile of the Northern Kingdom.) See also Matt 10:5-6; 15:54 and the reference to the "lost sheep of the house of Israel."

¹⁴ Isa 9:6-7. There is also a link to a *Davidic* kingdom and the affirmation that the "zeal of the LORD of hosts *will* do this." Isa 42:6b-7 also says: "a light to the *nations*, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who *sit* in darkness." Matthew's readers would have appreciated these subtle connections. (See also Ps 107:10-16).

¹⁵ Matt 4:17. The Greek word for "preach" or "proclaim" is that of an *authorised herald*, in this context, authorised by *God*.

¹⁶ Matt 3:2.

¹⁷ Isa 9:2; 42:6b.

¹⁸ The other Gospels use the phrase "kingdom of God" and Matthew replaces "God" with "heaven" out of reverence for the LORD's *name* (YHWH).

¹⁹ Matt 6:10.

expectations of “kingdom” to *include* non-Jews and *disconnect* it from mere nationalism. God’s kingdom will be a revolutionary *community* of those who have new *hearts* given by God’s Spirit,²⁰ and God will be their king who will, at the end of time, bring about that long-promised reign of peace and justice.²¹ Jesus was therefore declaring that God’s kingdom of light, healing, and forgiveness has *now* “come near.” And this also meant danger, as well as hope, for if justice and peace are on the way, then those who have twisted justice and disturbed the peace may be in trouble. They need to get their act together while there is time – they need to turn their lives around, or to “repent.” What we *feel* is irrelevant, it’s what we *do* that matters, namely change and go in the opposite direction *toward* God. Jesus believed that his contemporaries are going in the wrong direction. They were bent on a revolution of the standard kind, involving military resistance to the occupying forces; they wanted a political and military takeover. However, Matthew reports that one of the earlier temptations of Jesus in the wilderness was to use his own status as God’s Messiah to launch an initiative that would sweep him into power, privilege, and glory.²² The fact that Jesus resisted that temptation reveals that God’s kingdom is *not* going to come about in that way.

Repentance is an important start,²³ but so is *discipleship*. According to Matthew, the first things Jesus does is call two fisherman, Simon and Andrew, saying, “Follow me.”²⁴ This is significant as Jesus *is taking the initiative*,²⁵ which was the opposite of rabbinic culture in those days where it was the *student* would seek a master and choose to learn from him. Moreover, notice how Jesus calls *ordinary* people to be his apprentices, rather than calling the elite from their positions of power and influence. That again reveals that God’s kingdom is going to be structured very differently from that of earthly kingdoms.

Not only does Jesus take the initiative in calling his followers, he will give them on-the-job *training* “to fish for people”²⁶ - to participate in the saving mission of Jesus. The fact that these people – and others – responded to the call of Jesus is the reason we’re here today, 2000 years later. This is *our* calling too and too often we wait for people to come to us and then we wonder why they don’t! We commission is to go to them. Our task today is, then, to share the good news about God’s kingdom in creative ways that are exciting enough to be contagious without compromising the message. Having said that, our proactive seeking of others must be non-manipulative – people cannot be coerced into God’s kingdom. In this process, we need to have *patience*; those who fish don’t expect instant results. We need to be *persistent*; sometimes we won’t catch anything, but those who fish expect this and are not discouraged. We need to have *courage* to share the good news and we also need to have the discerning eye for the

²⁰ See Ezek 11:19; 36:26; Jer 31:33; and Heb 8:10; it makes sense to say Jesus is the king of those with renewed *hearts*.

²¹ That is why it is also an “*eschatological*” kingdom. Note this *community* is the “new Israel” – the Church – not merely a privatised religion.

²² See Matt 4:8-10.

²³ Repent (Greek *metanoia*) means to change one’s *mind* – a U-turn, and is a standard prophetic means of reconciliation with God – it was not unique John the Baptist or Jesus.

²⁴ Matt 4:19a. This is really a *command*!

²⁵ See also John 15:16. The call of the first disciples is the beginning of the messianic community – the Church.

²⁶ Matt 4:19. See also Matt 10 and: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/The-Harvest-is-Plentiful.pdf>

right moment. There are times when the conditions are not right to fish; people are not receptive and we should recognize that and not waste our effort but wait until we sense the time is right. We must also recognize that different people respond in different ways – there is not one “right” way to fish! And just as in fishing, the person who fishes is *not* meant to be the star attraction. Rather, it’s the bait, who is Jesus Christ and his kingdom message of forgiveness, love, hope, and joy. Too often today there is a cult-like following of charismatic personalities in Christian leadership; this has its obvious dangers in obscuring the gospel’s counter-cultural message.

Matthew then tells us that “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.”²⁷ Matthew stresses the preaching and teaching of Jesus *before* mentioning the miracles.²⁸ Even so, miracles are important because they are a *sign* of what new thing God was going to do through Jesus and they are the first-fruits of what will happen when God’s kingdom comes in all its fulness.²⁹ Some might say that Jesus’ fame was because he was a miracle worker and exorcist, rather than a preacher; Matthew seems to think otherwise given that his next big block is the Sermon on the Mount, rather than a description of miracle stories. And that is what we will be exploring over the next few Sundays. The point being it is the *authority* and *authenticity* of Christ’s *teaching* that makes his miracles significant. Miracles are not merely publicity stunts to pull a crowd,³⁰ they demonstrate the truth *of his message* - that God’s kingdom is truly at hand.

In conclusion, in *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo Baggins is urged by the wizard Gandalf to leave behind his comfortable existence to set out on a quest. He does so, accompanied by friends, not knowing the demands of the journey ahead or that their lives will be forever changed. Harry and Meghan have also taken a life-changing step of faith. Too often such “steps of faith” are in *our* own abilities and networks to shape *our* futures. In contrast, the *object* of the Christian’s step of faith is in *God’s* promise to bring about his kingdom. What, then, is *our* reaction to Christ’s command to “Follow me”? Do we respond by asking, “Is baptism or church attendance not enough?” Do we say, “I’m trying to be loving and kind!” Or are we waiting for a miracle or a powerful religious experience before we will commit ourselves to follow? Do we consider the cost of radical discipleship and then say, “No thanks!” In Matthew’s account, these fishermen have never seen Jesus before, never heard of his teachings or witnessed a miracle. They’re *not* told *why* they should follow Jesus, or what following him will mean, or where the path will lead them. The fact that they followed him is Christ’s first miracle, especially since they knew what just happened to John the Baptist! The question for us all today is, “Will we recommit ourselves to the radical call of Jesus to ‘Follow me and fish for people’?”

²⁷ Matt 4:23.

²⁸ The Sermon on the Mount begins in Matt 5. (Mark 1:21-39 mentions that Jesus taught, but places initial emphasis on Jesus as a miracle worker and exorcist.)

²⁹ While there has always been a fascination with miracles, we the *meaning* of such signs of grace are the vitally important.

³⁰ Matt 4:24-25.

Finally, at the end of Matthew's Gospel, the risen Jesus says these words those followers he called. Listen out for the authoritative language of *kingship*. Hear what Jesus says again: "All authority *in heaven and on earth* has been given to me. Therefore, *go and make disciples of all nations*, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and *teaching* them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age."³¹ Amen. Let us pray.

³¹ Matt 28:18-20.