

Follow Me

Isaiah 9:1-4; Matthew 4:12-23

Five years ago and ten years ago I was in the Holy Land. I hope to go back again some time. Over the Christmas and Epiphany period in the Church year, when our focus is on the places of Jesus' birth, growing up and ministry. Galilee of the Gentiles, well to the north of the metropolitan heartland of Jesus' nation around Jerusalem, was looked upon by the heartland people with a fair bit of suspicion, like the way Lowland Scotland regarded the Gaelic-speaking Highlands before the 1745 Rebellion, or people from Edinburgh look on the land beyond Corstorphine where the M8 leads, and where dwell dragons, or even those who live on the 'wrong' side of Comiston Road. Leith Fisher, a Church of Scotland minister who served in the Wellington Church, opposite Glasgow University, paints a wonderful picture describing the lie of the land mentioned in the passage.

Galilee of the Gentiles was home to a large number of non-Jewish incomers, whose Greek ways were often at odds with orthodox Judaism. It was very firmly under Roman rule, through the notorious family dynasty of Herod. It was occupied territory, and native Galileans resented their land being taken away from them in much the same way as Palestinians today resent the Israeli settlements in the Occupied Territories along the West Bank. In Jesus' day, as now, there was a slow smouldering sense of injustice and resentment, rising like a dark cloud blocking out light, and hope, and peace.¹

Nazareth, the town of Jesus' upbringing, to some would be like another sleepy little rural village, except there were no sleep little rural villages in a land of occupation. It was only a hilltop away

from the crossing of the main trade routes through Israel, that also echoed to the marching boots of Roman legionnaires.

Capernaum, a fishing village of around 1,000 inhabitants on the shore of Lake Galilee. It was a community of ordinary, pretty poor, native working people, trying to eke out a living.

Syria and the Decapolis, not simply the modern boundaries of the state we know today, but here the place of the non-Jews, and the Decapolis, the ten Greek towns around the borders of Galilee. This is the land from which, or across which the Magi travelled to see the infant Jesus. Jesus' mission was not just for His own people the Jews, it would stretch out and touch those who were strangers, those who were enemies, as well as those who should be able to hear, understand and follow.

And they were close by the Jordan, the site of Jesus' recent baptism. A place where the wandering Israelites under Joshua crossed out of slavery and into the freedom of their Promised Land. Out of a kind of darkness into a kind of light.

In this land of Old and New Testaments mixing together, behind the geography there lies a complex human landscape. It is a landscape of faith and doubt, political subjection, economic exploitation and cultural turmoil. Into this borderland world, this world of darkness and light, Jesus begins His ministry. A world, that echoes some of the situations of our world today.

Jesus came, to call to the world to turn away from the darkness and see and feel that light was coming. Jesus came to call the ordinary and extraordinary men and women of His day to listen out for what God might be saying, and if they heard the voice, and were challenged by the words, to follow, and to do something about what they heard and saw.

Jesus came to tell them that the world was changing and would continue to change. No smooth trajectory from darkness to light, from suffering to healing, from despair to hope, but a pathway where, by His example, He would invite those around to follow.

Jesus came to talk about a different way to live, a different set of principles to apply to making decisions, a different vision for the kind of world for all God's people. It doesn't have to be fear, it can be hope. It doesn't have to be emptiness, it can be fulfilment. It doesn't have to be exclusion and shutting out, it can be inclusion and welcoming in. It doesn't have to be them, it can be us. It doesn't have to be a closed door, but an open one. It doesn't have to be darkness, it could be light.

Following Jesus isn't about escape from the world, it is about engaging with the world. It's not about being saved and well in the future, it's about acting today to make our world a better place, to encourage others to join with us, and to continue the making and remaking process that is human faith and life.

One of the things I find continually encouraging and frustrating about the Christian life, and the call of Jesus to 'Follow Me', is that it never quite stays constant. Just when you have got it right, whatever it is, your job, your relationship, your health, your charity, your home, your Church, something shifts, good or bad, and you have to get back to work again. In truth, it would be pretty boring if it didn't, though there's no shame in confessing that if it could just stay still for long enough for us to enjoy that would be no bad thing.

The writer Laurie Lee, writing about his childhood in a memoir, *Cider with Rosie*, talks about his mother and his home in rural Gloucestershire. She was nearly always on the go, her hand-to-mouth feeding that expressed her vigilance, like that of a wireless operator at sea. "For most of Mother's attention was fixed on the grate, whose fire must never go out..." Panic and frenzy to

keep it going, as important to the family as it must have been to a primitive tribe. "When it sulked and sank we were filled with dismay; when it blazed all was well with the world...but if – God save us – it went out altogether, then we were clutched by primeval chills. Then it seemed that the very sun had died, that winter had come for ever, that the wolves of the wilderness were gathering near, and that there was no more hope to look for...But tonight the firelight snapped and crackled, and Mother was in full control..."ⁱⁱ

Does this capture the essence of life itself? It can be going swimmingly and smoothly; it can be fractured and raw; it can be filled with fear, it can be awash with hope; it can be gripped by the chill of death, it can be sparkling with the light of life.

Into this light-dark world, walking along a seashore, Jesus comes and speaks to tell people about a better way, a brighter way. A way that has to be worked towards and never taken for granted, but a way that will, in the end, bring a life worth living and a world worth living in.

And maybe, just maybe, for Peter and Andrew, for James and John, and for all the others who followed afterwards, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness - on them the light has shined..."

2,000 years on, there are times when it feels for us that we are the people still sitting in darkness.

The fear and the conflict and the confusion in our political world, and in countries across the globe where darkness and evil and hunger and destruction stalk the land. Every news bulletin piles it on.

But there's still light. Sometimes blazing, sometimes barely flickering, but each time someone decides to do the good thing, the decent thing, the right thing, something sparks, something glows, and the little light might even become a great light. In every darkness we long for light, because light is the promise that something important is on its way. When the night is long,

personally, nationally, it is hard to speak of dawn. The world can be so dark. We don't always see a light. But Isaiah in his day, and Jesus in His says, "You will one day."

How many times has it been for us that we let our pessimism keep us from dreams of God's future that is still bigger than the past? How many times do we cower in darkness and ignore the dazzling light God promises? When the young father takes his newborn daughter in his arms for the first time; when a troubled couple after a no-holds-barred fight suddenly see again what it is that they love about each other; when a person receives a diagnosis of possible life-changing illness for themselves, or a loved-one, and finds hope in a surgeon, or from a friend who has gone through the same thing; when a child in the corner of a playground, new to the school, friendless, is invited to join a game; when a funeral service in a time of tragedy suddenly brings the mourners to a place of thanksgiving and positive memory.

When darkness, in time, dawns into light. When the Christ light shines into the darkest places of our lives. When Jesus, on a seashore, seeing the darkness, says to fishermen, 'follow Me'. And side-by-side, step by step, we move along, with Him.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Leith Fish, 'But I say to you', pps37ff

ⁱⁱ Laurie Lee, Cider with Rosie, p72