

## Bennochy church: 27th January 2019

One of the things we can say about the writers of the New Testament, people like Matthew, is this; they knew how to use their theological heritage. Matthew in particular, uses every opportunity to use the ancient scriptures, what we call the Old Testament, as evidence of what was happening in the life of Jesus. He is saying to his readers, it was all meant to be. And as his readers were primarily Jewish, that was hugely important.

At this point in the story of Jesus, sandwiched between two stories of colossal importance, his temptations in the desert and the call of the first disciples, there is this little interlude, a kind of, 'connecting passage', where Matthew's use of the great prophecy of Isaiah, I have to say, I find a bit tenuous.

To get Jesus into the land of Naphtali and Zebulum, he has him, for some reason, moving from Nazareth, his home town, to Capernaum, by lake Galilee. Where on walking along the shore, he meets his first disciples. But that is another story. At this moment in time, the light first shines, not in the capital city of Jerusalem, as might be expected, but in the backwater of Galilee.

When the people of Israel first invade the land promised to them by God, it was divided up amongst the 12 tribes of Israel, and two of them were Naphtali and Zebulum. *"On the road to the sea, on the other side of the Jordan"* (river). One of the

things we can read into this story, is a movement from the ancient 12 tribes of Israel, to the beginning of the original 12 disciples of Jesus. There were more than 12 disciples, and some of the 12 listed, we never really hear of them again. But to the Jewish readers of Matthew, that connection was important. It legitimised the ministry of Jesus, and at the same time said, God is going to work in a new way. 'Catching people instead of fish', for the Kingdom of God. But that story is for another day.

So Matthew wants to make connections for his readers. Theological connections. This is not history. It is not important whether Jesus actually moved to Capernaum, or whether it was related to the imprisonment of John the Baptist, nor was he worried, whether that prophecy had anything at all to do with a future Messiah figure. What mattered for Matthew, was making the connections between the ancient scriptures, and episodes in the life of Jesus, for the new Jewish Christians, and he does that, all the way through his gospel. As I said earlier, in the mind of Matthew and for his Jewish readers, it legitimises who Jesus is, and his claim to be God's Messiah. Matthew is using the ancient texts for his own purpose. It is his interpretation.

The use of the image of light and darkness, is scattered throughout the bible, and it is picked up by Jesus himself. The nation of God's people were meant to be a 'light to the other nations'. But in spite of the words of the great prophets, God's message became a closely guarded secret, only for them and no

one else. That was not what God intended. The opening section of John's gospel is all about how God's light is now coming into the world, to shine on all humanity. As it should have been.

In this small insignificant passage, Matthew re-connects with the ancient prophecy and links it directly with the ministry of Jesus. His message is one of, here is NOW light shining in the darkness. *"Turn away from your sins, because the Kingdom of heaven is near."* It is a message for everyone.

I wonder how that image connects today? In the movies / dramas, those scenes cloaked in darkness, where everything seems to happen at night, in disused buildings or caves; you know something bad is about to happen. You think, 'What are you doing in there?' It plays on our Psyche. The music heightens our emotions and fear builds around that which you cannot see. You scream at the TV, at least wait till the morning, till it is light.

Here are three quotes, I wonder if you know who said them.

*"There are darkneses in life and there are lights, and you are one of the lights, the light of all lights."*

— **Bram Stoker, Dracula** (1897) Some might say, that story is the ultimate contrast, between darkness and light.

*"We can easily forgive a child who is afraid of the dark; the real tragedy of life is when men are afraid of the light."* — **Plato**. I think Jesus said something similar.

*"Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that."*

— **Martin Luther King Jr., A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches**

We all have our dark places. We wonder what life is all about. What are we doing here? Tragedy strikes. We ask, 'why me?' Those times we can see no light at the end of the tunnel. Life is dark, heavy. We all have our dark places. Moments in our lives that we have kept secret, fearful of what others might think.

If this passage is to have any meaning and relevance to us today, then it must address our hopes and fears. The message of Jesus must be a message to us, that says, peace to you, in your most anxious times. Hope to you, when you are in the midst of despair, and God's love to you, in the dark places of life.

The promise of God is this, Christ's light will shine and if the kingdom of heaven is truly near, then, light is already invading the power of darkness, and we will experience that light in our lives. Bit by bit. Moment by moment. And even, crisis by crisis.

The honesty of the Psalmists reveal that to be true. Darkness will always cast its shadow on our lives, but a shadow is only ever seen, when the light of the sun, is shining. Amen.