

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

Our readings today are rich in historical content; Isaiah refers to gloom - a very good word for this time of year - the gloom of those in darkness and distress, and he illustrates this by referencing the humbling of the Lands of Zebulun and Naphtali. Naphtali was the sixth son of Jacob, born to Bilhah, and Zebulun was his tenth son, born to Leah. Both were brothers to Joseph, he of the multicoloured coat and somewhat marmite musical, who was sold into slavery in Egypt on account of his brothers' jealousy. They are therefore two of the twelve founding tribes of Isreal, and the lands they settled in, and were named after them, surrounded the sea of Galilee - Naphtali encircled the sea itself and Zebulun, lay slightly to the West.

So what was the cause of the darkness these people were suffering in? It refers to the growing threat from the Assyrian Empire to the North East, situated in what is essentially modern-day Iraq. This threat became a reality in 732 BC when they invaded Naphtali and Zebulun, before going on to conquer the whole of Northern Judea. By all accounts the Assyrians were a brutally efficient army, highly skilled in siege warfare. Having conquered the region they cemented their control by implementing mass Israelite deportations, something which has chilling echoes in more recent history. This meant the region became extremely ethnically diverse, giving rise to the name 'Galilee of the nations.' Moving on seven centuries, as Matthew's gospel recounts, it is this exact area, this melting pot of race and culture, Jewish and gentile, where Christ begins his ministry.

It is striking to see where Jesus starts searching for his disciples - not in the temple, nor amongst those in apparent authority, but on the shores of lake Galilee. They way our gospel reading puts it, it almost seems he chooses the first four people he comes across. I think this is a precious insight into God's timing and planning; there is the accurate fulfilment of a seven century-old prophecy, and at the same time, the four fishermen who just happened to be there – as such, it is very much Kairos time, that sense of the perfect moment, that Rev. Jon has often referred to in church prayer. It is also reminiscent of one of the great lines in the Lord of the Rings – when the hobbit Frodo accuses the wizard Gandalf of being late and receives the riposte, '...a wizard is never late Frodo Baggins, nor is he early, he arrives precisely when he means to.'

God also arrives precisely when he means to - and the extraordinary and wonderful conclusion we can draw from this, is that while his plan is infinite, spectacular and far beyond our comprehension – it also includes you and me, now. And not just you and me but all people - Christ is still searching for disciples, his Holy Spirit walks amongst us and he promises to show himself to everyone. All we have to do is respond, just like those first four disciples who simply leave their nets, and with them the life they thought they were going to lead, to set out on a dramatically different one.

We may feel unworthy, inadequate or guilty or a combination of all three – but to dispel any such doubts, one only has to consider the original disciples’ record; take Peter for example, the disciple who denied Christ three times, despite being warned he would do so, was the very disciple on which the Western Church was founded. Also consider Isaiah’s reference to the Midianites, whose army of many thousands was defeated by Gideon, using tactics provided by God in a dream, but with a force of just three hundred – earthly odds, whatever they may be, are of no consequence to God.

It cannot be put much better than that exceptionally beautiful verse in Dear Lord and father of mankind which we will sing in a moment . ‘In simple trust like theirs who heard beside the Syrian sea, the gracious calling of the Lord; let us like them, without a word, rise up and follow thee’. Those two words ‘simple trust’, I think encapsulate everything I have been trying to say - that in the end, is all our Lord is asking for – to give him the life he gave us.

I mentioned earlier the gloom of this time of year, with its short, cold and damp days – well allow me to suggest an antidote, that is taking place this very weekend, in which we can all take part - and that is the Big Garden Bird Watch. It involves looking at your garden, or simply out of your window for one hour and recording the highest number of each species of bird you see at any one time. It is very simple to register online and I have even bought some forms with me. It is a golden opportunity to switch off your phone, pull up the comfiest chairs, make a hot of cup of tea, or maybe something stronger and drink in God’s creation for one hour – I promise you will feel better.

There are two particular parallels with what I have been talking about. The first is that if you take part you will be joining over half a million people, whose combined willingness to volunteer creates a hugely significant piece of citizen science, with a level of data that could never be gathered by scientists alone. In the same way, our combined willingness to volunteer in this church, to worship and pray with, and for, each other - that shared discipleship, however humble, creates something that glorifies God and in doing so, becomes immeasurably more than the sum of its parts. The second parallel is the emphasis the Garden birdwatch guide puts on what is not there, the record of birds you don’t see is just as important. In a way this brings to mind the times when we may struggle to see the way forward, when God feels distant, when we are consumed by life’s storms and like the People of Zebulun and Naphtali, we are surrounded by darkness. It is in just such times that we should hold fast to that simple trust, relying on God’s promise that, precisely when he means to, we will hear his still, small voice.

Amen.

Michael Grist, 25 Jan 2026