

## [Matthew 4:12-23](#)

Light.

Here is a quote that a friend of mine posted on Facebook the other day:

I will love the light for it shows me the way, yet I will endure the darkness for it shows me the stars.'

(Og Mandino)

It resonated with me as I read today's passage in Matthew 4, where the evangelist quotes the famous words of Isaiah,

the people living in darkness  
have seen a great light;  
on those living in the land of the shadow of death  
a light has dawned

(Matthew 4:16/Isaiah 9:2)

We associate those words from Isaiah with Christmas. I have picked them for most carol services. For Christians, they are a prophecy of the Messiah, Jesus.

But the New Testament doesn't connect them with the birth of Jesus. Their association with Christmas comes not from Scripture but from their use in Handel's 'Messiah'<sup>1</sup>. In the Bible, Jesus is only revealed as the light coming to the people in darkness when he begins his public ministry here.

Yet here's the thing about Jesus coming as the great light in the darkness: he has come to form a community of light, because in the next chapter he will tell his disciples they are the light of the world (Matthew 5:14-16).

So what Jesus is doing in today's reading is setting down the foundations for his community of light. Here are three of those foundations:

**Firstly, *repentance*.**

<sup>17</sup> From that time on Jesus began to preach, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'

The kingdom of God has come near, so repent. At its core, the word repent means 'a change of mind', both in the English and the Greek of the New Testament.

But repentance is not just an intellectual change. It is such a change of mind about life and truth that our lives and conduct change, too.

Why? Because 'the kingdom of heaven has come near.' That is, the king himself has arrived, and his name is Jesus. Just as Roman heralds would go through the towns and villages to proclaim the accession of a new Emperor, so Jesus announces his own coming as king. And if there is a new king on the throne of the universe, then it is his will that is to be obeyed, rather than whoever or whatever we were following before – our own self-gratification, the disordered self-centredness of society, or the lies of the enemy.

For the community of light that Jesus is beginning is the kingdom of God community. It is what the great American Free Methodist scholar Howard Snyder called, 'The Community of the King.'

When we gather on Sunday for worship or in a small group in the week, we are gathering as the community of King Jesus. We are light to the world by living out our allegiance to him, not by making the faith easier to believe as we compromise with the standards of the world. All that does by definition is expand the darkness. Being the light requires being different, and that means repentance. And not one-off repentance, but something we keep coming back to throughout our lives.

Most of us probably have a good idea about things we need to change in our lives to bring them under the rule of King Jesus. The difficulty may be in where to start! So let us ask the Holy Spirit for guidance about our next steps in repentance.

### **Secondly, *fishing*.**

<sup>19</sup>'Come, follow me,' Jesus said, 'and I will send you out to fish for people.'

I have only been fishing once in my life. I was on a mission trip to Norway and our church hosts took us fishing in a fjord. If we didn't catch any fish that afternoon, we wouldn't eat that evening. Fortunately, we caught enough – although I only contributed one.

It's the same for the church. We need to fish in order to live. We can't wait for people to come to us. For too long we did that, and it was an act of complacency in times when people had some similarities to us and sympathies with us. Those days are gone.

It's pretty likely that Simon Peter and Andrew heard Jesus' vision of fishing for people as a sign that they would be sent to the Gentiles. For in the Old Testament, to be delivered from the waters was to be delivered from foreigners. There is some similar New Testament language in the Book of Revelation. And Gentiles were sometimes compared to terrifying mythical sea creatures.<sup>2</sup>

We need to get beyond our existing boundaries, says Jesus. It's no good just spending time with our own kind. The Good News is for all. Matthew has already referred in this passage to 'Galilee of the Gentiles'. In his birth stories, it is the Gentile Magi who worship, not the Jewish teachers. And at the end of his Gospel we shall have the Great Commission to go into all the world. It all begins here.

But, you say, I'm not the sort of person for that. May I remind you that neither were Simon Peter and Andrew? It was unusual for a rabbi to come and recruit disciples. Normally young men chose a rabbi to follow. The fact that these young men are not following a rabbi but out in the working world tells you they weren't the brightest talent. But Jesus called them.

And Jesus calls us, too. He reminds us that we know people beyond the boundaries of the church who need the love of Jesus.

Remember, if we don't do it, we starve, we die.

But how? That leads to the **third** foundation of the community of light, ***word and deed***.

<sup>23</sup> Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and illness among the people.

Now perhaps you hear that and say, 'But I can't preach and teach. And I've prayed for friends and family who are sick but none of them has got better. So how can I follow Jesus?'

Well – we don't all have the same gifts, but the common thread is this: we take the light of the kingdom community beyond its boundaries by sharing the good

news in word and deed. We may each have different ways of doing that, but a commitment to sharing God's love in word and deed is the key principle. Although you should never write off the power of the Holy Spirit, of course!

Even though our wider society and culture turns increasingly away from Christian values, and even as it adopts a less and less friendly attitude to the church, we cannot go out into the world with our heads down. Nor as Christians can we go into the world with the thought that these people are so negative against us that we are going to curse them. We show love, even to our enemies.

A Bible passage I'm sure I've mentioned before to you but which is one of my favourites for understanding our calling today is Jeremiah 29. The prophet Jeremiah writes a letter to those of his people who have been forcibly taken into exile from the Promised Land to Babylon. Rather than cursing their captors, Jeremiah tells the exiles to bless them and to seek their welfare.

I think that's one place where we start today. Here's an example to make us ponder.<sup>3</sup> Last week, the Advertising Standards Authority banned poster adverts for the latest album by the pop star Demi Lovato. The album is called 'Holy F\*ck' and portrays her in sexual bondage gear on a bed shaped like a crucifix as if she is on the Cross, like Christ. So pretty repulsive, and you can see why the ASA banned the posters for their offence to Christians.

But this is a young woman who, after becoming a child TV star, developed eating disorders and was subjected to sexual abuse. As she tried to cope with the pain, she became addicted to drugs and suffered mental health issues. A heroin overdose nearly killed her. She sustained brain damage and temporary blindness.

Her manager encouraged her to attend a church Bible study, and for a short while she felt close to God. But on the new album she sings that ultimately she felt like she didn't fit in at church.

In our world, there are plenty of broken people who think they don't fit in with church. Most of their stories are nothing like as dramatic as Demi Lovato's. But they need God's healing love showing to them and explained to them. They need the light of Christ, and his community, the light of the world, are the people to do this.

That means us. We are the community of King Jesus, not a religious club.

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<sup>1</sup> I owe this insight to Ian Paul at <https://www.psephizo.com/biblical-studies/the-calling-of-the-first-disciples-in-matthew-4/>

<sup>2</sup> Ian Paul, *op. cit.* *citing Chad Bird via Peter Leithart.*

<sup>3</sup> What follows is based on James Emery White at <https://www.churchandculture.org/blog/2023/1/19/a-prayer-for-demi-lovato>