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Isaiah 9:1-4  
1 Corinthians 1:10-18  
Matthew 4:12-23

Land of Terrace End and land of Roslyn, by State Highway 3, beside the Manawatu River, Palmerston North of the nations – the people who sit in darkness have seen a great light, and on those who sit in the region of the shadow of death, a light has dawned.

Of course these familiar places are not the ones we find in our Gospel reading today. Matthew 4 is full of geographic references. The surface narrative point is that Jesus takes his ministry into the region of Galilee (in the north), but in doing so chooses to locate, not in his home town of Nazareth, but in Capernaum. Nazareth lies to the west-southwest of the lake called the Sea of Galilee; Capernaum lies on the lake's north-western shore. Jesus takes his ministry into Galilee on hearing that John the Baptist has been arrested and imprisoned in Jerusalem (in Judah in the south). It is unclear whether this is a signal from God that a new phase in Jesus' ministry should begin in a region ripe for harvest, or that Jesus withdrew into Galilee because John's arrest signalled greater risk in the south. The latter seems the less likely explanation, as the same Herod Antipas ruled both Judea and Galilee.<sup>1</sup>

However, there is deeper meaning behind these geographical details. The deeper meaning starts with history, and is reflected in the less familiar names in Matthew's Gospel. Zebulon and Naphtali were two of the sons of Jacob; their descendants carried these names as their tribal identities; and then the tribal names became attached to their allotted territories when they entered the Promised Land. These lands of Zebulon and Naphtali were the region running north and west from the western shore of the Sea of Galilee.

By Isaiah's time, the once united kingdom of Israel had become divided into Judah in the south and Israel in the north. The lands of Zebulon and Naphtali were part of the northern kingdom, which was by then under the reign of a foreign imperial power: the Assyrians had conquered all of the northern kingdom of Israel around 733 BC.

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<sup>1</sup> Osborne, *Matthew*, p.141

Occupied by this foreign power, the whole region could no longer be thought of as truly and exclusively Hebrew: it had become “Galilee of the nations” or “Galilee of the Gentiles”.<sup>2</sup>

The “way of the sea” probably refers to a road, called the *Via Maris* by the Romans, which ran from Damascus through Galilee to the Mediterranean. An important trade route, it also brought a great many Gentiles and their culture into the region: it would also have been an important route for the movement and supply of imperial forces.<sup>3</sup>

Into the darkness of this contested land of multiple allegiances comes the word of God through the prophet: Isaiah’s prophecy is of a future king, whose reign would restore these lands and reunite the divided nations of Israel and Judah.<sup>4</sup>

When we fast forward to the time of Jesus, this area is still “Galilee of the nations”; it is still under the boot of a foreign power – now Rome – and it is still a land of multiple peoples with different allegiances. It is into this contested territory that Jesus now starts his work of teaching and healing.

Jesus’ message is direct: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

*Jock, a painter, often would dilute his paint so it would go further. So when the church decided to do some deferred maintenance, Jock was able to put in the low bid, and got the job. As always, he thinned his paint way down with turpentine.*

*One day while he was up on the scaffolding -- the job almost finished -- he heard a horrendous clap of thunder, and the sky opened.*

*The downpour washed the thinned paint off the church and knocked Jock off his scaffold and onto the lawn among the gravestones and puddles of thinned and worthless paint.*

*Jock knew this was a warning from the Almighty, so he got on his knees and cried: “Oh, God! Forgive me! What should I do?”*

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<sup>2</sup> In both the Hebrew of the Old Testament and the Greek of the New Testament the same word can be translated both “nations” and “Gentiles”, and we recall that “Gentile” is the term used to refer to anyone who is not Jewish.

<sup>3</sup> Osborne, *Matthew*, pp.142-143

<sup>4</sup> Engelhardt, “Commentary”

*And from the thunder, a mighty voice: “Repaint! Repaint! And thin no more!”<sup>5</sup>*

Actually, the Bible does not contain the specific words “Repent, and sin no more”. It is true that Jesus did tell people to “sin no more”, and it is true that there is a moral element to the call to repent. But it is all too easy for us to leave the matter there. It is also all too easy to assume that repentance is all about how we feel: we think that to repent is to feel sorry for what we’ve done. In these ways we water down the idea of repentance when it is actually a much bigger matter. In the joke Jock isn’t called to feel sorry for what he has done: he is called to *act* – to repaint – and to go on acting – to thin no more – in a way congruent with his true calling to be a painter.

Repentance is about a total change of mind and heart that involves a new lifestyle and behaviour as well as a new allegiance to God and Christ.<sup>6</sup>

We are at risk of thinning things down further when we come to the rest of Jesus’ message, “Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near,” if we fail to get the meaning of the word “heaven”. When, in Matthew, we encounter the phrase “kingdom of heaven”, we are simply coming across a common way in which people of the time referred to the kingdom of God – “heaven” was a convenient circumlocution so that they could reverently avoid saying the holy name of God.<sup>7</sup> And God’s intention is that his kingdom – his kingly reign – will be established throughout the cosmos, as we say in the prayer Jesus taught, “on earth as in heaven.”

So the point is that the coming near of the kingdom of heaven did not imply some kind of escape from “Galilee of the nations”, either in the immediate future or after death. It meant the coming of the reign of God to replace the reign of whoever else happened to be demanding tribute and allegiance at the time.

To the people of God in that time and that place Jesus’ words contained challenge and hope. The hope was in the expectation that somehow, through Jesus, the present arrangement would be overthrown: no longer would they have to face Roman rule with local puppet-kings like Herod Antipas undertaking Rome’s dirty

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.frtommylane.com/stories/jokes/repaint.htm> (Slightly amended)

<sup>6</sup> Osborne, *Matthew*, p.145

<sup>7</sup> Wright, *Matthew*, p.28

work and throwing their weight around doing such things as arresting John the Baptist. Jesus' words contained great hope: in him the kingdom of *heaven* has come near.

But his words also contain challenge: the challenge part lay in that word "repent". Jesus believed that his contemporaries were going in the wrong direction. They were bent on revolution of the standard kind: military resistance to occupying forces, leading to a takeover of power. The problem with all these movements was that they were fighting darkness with darkness, and Israel was called – and Jesus was called – to bring God's *light* into the world. If light-bearers insist on darkness, darkness they shall have. If the peace-people insist on war, war they shall have. If the people called to bring God's love and forgiveness into the world insist on hating everyone else, hatred and all it brings will come crashing around their ears. This won't be an arbitrary judgement or punishment; it will be what they themselves have been calling for. This is why they must repent while there's still time. The kingdom of God is coming, and they are standing in the way.<sup>8</sup>

Along with a message, Jesus has a *method* to inaugurating the kingdom of God. The first thing Jesus did was to call followers. And this is no casual thing: this is again all about ultimate allegiance. Simon Peter and Andrew, James and John, are called away from jobs and family – vital symbols of their identity and of allegiances that might rival their loyalty to God – to become part of something new, without knowing where and to what it would lead.<sup>9</sup>

Jesus did not just call followers, but he called them into *community*, to be a *people*, a new kind of nation. By the time of Isaiah's prophecies, the once united family of Jacob's descendants had experienced fracture after fracture, tribal group against tribal group. And as they had done so they had become weaker and weaker, and had succumbed to foreign invasion. Jesus called his followers to be a new community, a family, united in him.

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<sup>8</sup> Wright, *Matthew*, pp.29-30

<sup>9</sup> Wright, *Twelve*, p.23

It was out of concern for that family that Paul wrote 1 Corinthians. Within this young church there were warring personality cults – among other divisions, as is apparent as we read the rest of Paul’s letter – and this was a disaster because it ran completely counter to the unity that was supposed to be shining God’s great light into the dark culture all around them.<sup>10</sup>

The 25<sup>th</sup> of January is kept as the feast of the Conversion of St Paul. As we think of Paul’s conversion, we do well to remind ourselves that this conversion brought about two things: a complete change of allegiance, and a complete change of methods. Having encountered the risen Lord, he gave away the status he had from his birth and education, the power of position, the tools of arrest and violence; now everything he did was evaluated in the light of Christ’s life, death and resurrection.

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We here today are a people located, not in Zebulon and Naphtali, not in Capernaum, not in Galilee of the nations, but in the particular geographic context of Palmerston North.<sup>11</sup> We do well to remember that it is indeed “Palmerston North of the nations”: we cannot assume a shared Christian heritage, values, and purpose. There are all manner of gods and rival allegiances – not all of which bear the label “religious” – promoted, worshipped, and served in our city in our day. This is contested territory. But we are called, not to escape this place, but rather to be partners with Christ in it, in the inauguration of God’s kingdom in this particular place and time.

And we are called to employ kingdom methods as we do so. Not for us the weapons of violence and hatred; not for us the approach of cutting others down to thrust our own agenda forward; not for us the path of thinking ourselves better than others; not for us the toxic methods of identity politics and tribalism. We are called to apply

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<sup>10</sup> Wright, *Twelve*, p.23

<sup>11</sup> The idea on which the following is developed was prompted by Lewis, “Mapping”

kingdom thinking and kingdom methods in our dealings within the church, as well as how we apply ourselves outside of the church, because we are brought together as a family to share in Christ's family business.

This "land of Terrace End and of Roslyn" is a land of deep darkness into which we are called to shine God's great light. We do this not least by seeking to make connections, to better know and understand the geography and community in which we are placed, to serve them, to bear witness to God's goodness and love, to pray in an informed way for this community and its needs.

Standing firm in this "Palmerston North of the nations", this place of all manner of loyalties other than to God and Christ Jesus, can be hard and uncomfortable, and can only be expected to become harder and even less comfortable – and may in time become downright dangerous. When Jesus calls "Come, follow me", he is not offering a comfortable life. But the alternative is simply to give in to the darkness. Let us be devoted bearers of *light*.

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