

What does it mean to be a disciple, to follow where Jesus leads us? As we near the end of our journey through Epiphany season our readings move us from the manifestation of who Jesus is – to what we do as a result of this. What does it mean that God is with us, and how does it impact on the way we live and are community. For the writer of Matthews Gospel, it is important that we understand that this means Jesus being the Messiah changes us.

Matthew reveals a great deal about Jesus in today's Gospel, and while a story of two halves it has one message. Firstly, Matthew records that Jesus hears of the arrest of John the Baptist and then withdraws from Galilee. It is hard to know why this might be, the word in Greek which is used by Matthew translates as 'flee'¹. Matthew uses the same word when the angel leads the Holy Family to Egypt and also after John is beheaded. In each instance, people flee because of imperial violence or the possibility of such violence. Now while Matthew has Jesus flee, he also takes the opportunity to make the link to Isaiah 9, the passage we also heard today, where the prophet

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4366

introduces the messianic king, who will lead people from darkness to light. Matthew is making a very political point in his writing. The Roman Empire had been subjecting people to darkness and death for generations. It made 'darkness' or injustice and death integral aspects of the society and tried to normalize them. In Matthew's use of Isaiah's prophecy, Jesus will lead people from darkness to light and destroy the power of death that Rome had come to embody. He shows that darkness need not be accepted as normal.

Matthew is making it very clear to his audience that Jesus has come to bring about social and political change, he is not here to sit in the temple studying texts and praying (though of course that will be part of who he is and he makes times for prayer each day) – but Jesus incarnation in more than this.

What is interesting about the Isaiah text is that while it was written at a time in history during the Assyrian occupation², this experience of *light in the midst of darkness* is not a concept limited to one period of time. Rather this passage from Isaiah is speaking powerfully into many contexts across

² https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3127

time and space. And so Matthew builds on this to give a clear message about who he believes Jesus to be – the Messiah, and that no matter the time - God seeks to bring light to our darkness – hope to our uncertainty. God will bring possibility when it all feels impossible.

On the back of this then Matthew positions Jesus preaching along the sea of Galilee that the time of repentance has come, for the Kingdom of God is near. Matthew's structure helps the reader understand that Jesus has now taken over from John, but the message and the challenge has not changed.

Now that Matthew has established this clear role for Jesus. Jesus moves quickly to invite the first set of disciples to join him with the promise of making them “fishers of people.” Jesus is going to challenge structures of power just as John had done. It is a transformative and dangerous mission that Jesus inherited from John and is inviting disciples into it. And they leave their families, livelihoods and instantly join him for little in return. The disciples were apparently inspired by

the mission and made radical commitments to the movement³.

These eleven verses from Matthew are rich in content and message. They make manifest that Jesus is the light, the Messiah, who has come to change the social and political world, and he calls his followers to leave all they know, all their certainty, even their livelihood to join this movement.

I find Matthew's gospel very challenging. Matthew leaves no room for uncertain or questioning discipleship, for Matthew Jesus requires a solid and decisive response. We are to leave all we know and follow.

In our Baptism we are commissioned to be disciples. The challenge is that we can believe that being a disciple means being part of church – which at one level it does. We are not called to follow God alone, but as a community. And the Church has a role to ensure Mission, Discipleship and Outreach into every community. The church universal seeks to have an active role in every community, providing spaces for prayer, contemplation and worship, and also responding

³ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4366

to the needs of the local community and the wider society. One of the primary roles of every church is also for nurturing and sustaining members of the community, who are not focused on the day to day work of the church, but actually have real jobs, in real places – which is most of the congregation.

Most people who come to learn about faith or come to hear the message of Jesus or are drawn to the peace which God offers - do not come to church on their own. Most people come because a work colleague, a school friend, a neighbour, someone they walk the dog with – talks about their experiences of faith or church – and so they come along to find out more.

If we want to grow as a church, we have to spend more time out of church talking about what is important to us, and more time in church praying for others to have an encounter with God.

The challenge is how do we talk about this as our mission. And it is a big challenge on many levels. One danger at church is that we talk about things we need to do in church, rosters, repairs or tasks, rather than what is happening in our lives and work, and praying with each other. Another is

that if we are shy or uncertain or just Australian, we may not want to talk about our faith anyway – it can be a scary thing. And we have grown up in a society that encourages us not to talk about religion in any form.

But we are disciples best when we are ourselves, when we tell our stories, when we live.

Jesus didn't ask the new disciples to stop being fisherpeople. He asked them to use their skills in a new way to change the world, and to set people free.

All God asks us is to be who we are. Who we are created to be. To support each other and to pray. To be light that might shine in the darkness of this world.

What ever our skills or gifts we are invited to share our story – to talk to others about what informs and nurtures and inspires us. To tell others why Jesus is so important to us. Sometimes we might even need the courage to tell ourselves the same thing.

This also informs our actions.

Lasts week we heard Meagan share with us so much of the good work being undertaken by the Anglican Board of Mission.

During the week a few people asked me about this – *isn't mission about telling people about God not buildings.* And it was a good question. Mission as we hear today is about sharing the story of Jesus. But like those who fish, sometimes we show and tell people about God's light and love, not only in words but in our actions. And so building a school is about practical mission which shares God's love in a practical needed way.

Like those first disciples we are each called to leave our nets and follow God. But we don't leave our practical skills – we take them with us and use them to share God's message of love.

As we come to the end of a time when we focus on how Jesus is manifest – or made known to us in this time, and in this place – we are invited to consider how we share this with us. How we make God known in the communities in which we live, in word and action.

All God asks us is that we be the people we are created to be. To support each other and to pray.

To be light that might shine in the darkness of this world. Amen.