

Other Bible Reading: Isaiah 9:1-4

When was the last time you moved home? How far did you move? And why did you move?

Suzie and I last moved in 2007 ... about 50 miles. And we moved, of course, so that I could take up a new post as Rector of St Nicolas, Great Bookham. As it happens, I have lived in Great Bookham longer than any other one place since the age of 19!

Jesus, our Gospel reading this morning tells us, left Nazareth and went to live in Capernaum, situated at the northern tip of the Sea of Galilee. We're talking here a distance of about 20 miles. In other words, the equivalent of moving, say, from Great Bookham to Horsham or Haslemere ... depending which way you go, of course.

As for his reason for moving, this is where you may find it helpful to have your Bibles open in front of you ... especially if you want to follow more closely what I am about to say. We're looking, then, at Matthew 4:12-23 – page 968 of the church Bibles.

Here again are vv13 and 14...

“Leaving Nazareth, Jesus went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali – to fulfil what was said through the prophet Isaiah ...”

At first glance, then, it seems that Jesus moved to fulfil prophecy. Because the prophet said it, Jesus did it! Well, maybe.

More likely, though, is that Jesus moved away from his hometown to place himself in a more strategic location, and this fulfilled what the prophet Isaiah had spoken about.

Capernaum was a great place for Jesus to begin his public ministry. It was a mix of both Jew and Gentile. Indeed, v15, the Isaiah quote refers to ‘Galilee of the Gentiles’. Jesus’ ministry would, in the first instance, focus on the Jewish community. But as we know from the unfolding story, the good news of the gospel would ultimately not be limited to just Jews. No, it would very much be for Gentiles also.

A ministry beginning in Capernaum would therefore send out the right signals.

Capernaum was also situated in pretty much the most densely populated area of the Middle East at that time. So no shortage of people to engage with, then!

And Capernaum was the focus of several trade routes. And so again, a great place to begin your public ministry with lots of people coming and going.

In passing, I can't help thinking that we are similarly blessed here in Bookham. We have a church building physically set here in the middle of the village. Church family members are

spread around the village, in homes and community groups. There are, in other words, great opportunities for the good news of Jesus to go out from here.

And so Jesus' public ministry begins. Here are two features of that public ministry as it begins.

1. A call to repent

V17, "From that time on Jesus began to preach, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'"

Now you will probably have noticed on previous occasions that there is both discontinuity and continuity between the ministry of Jesus and that of his relative John the Baptist, who of course prepared the way for Jesus' coming.

Discontinuity most certainly in the sense that Jesus presents as a rather gentler and more merciful figure than does John. Also, Jesus speaks rather less of baptism than does John, but does more, as we shall come to see, in the way of preaching and healing.

So discontinuity, for sure.

But not complete discontinuity. There were, too, great similarities, not least in this call to repent, which as well as being a hallmark of John's preaching, was evidently a feature of Jesus' too.

Repentance. It's a call to change one's mind, for sure. But more than that, it's a call to change direction. It's a call for a radical shift in perspective. It's a call to completely rethink the focus of one's life. It's a call to turn away from everything that is contrary to God's purposes and to turn instead towards everything that is in keeping with his purposes.

So imagine someone heading north. That's north, over there. Imagine they are travelling in that direction. What Jesus is calling people to do is an about turn, to turn around completely. To stop heading north – that way, but to head south - that way!

As to the reason for calling people to repent, it's because 'the kingdom of heaven has come near'. Matthew, as you know, often prefers the word 'heaven' to the word 'God'. It's because he is mindful that his gospel is primarily intended for a Jewish readership. Other Gospel writers, however, will often speak of the 'kingdom of God'. Same difference. The kingdom of heaven has drawn near. The kingdom of God has drawn near.

The kingdom is, to recall Bishop Tom Wright's memorable phrase, 'God's plan to put the world to rights'. What Jesus is saying, then, to his hearers in Capernaum is that God's plan to put the world to rights has begun, and so repent, turn around.

That, then, is Jesus's first call: a call to repent.

Second, he issues...

2. A call to participate

It's a fact of life, isn't it, that many prefer to be spectators rather than participants. Spectating requires less effort. Spectating leaves you free to come and go as you please. Spectating risks less unpopularity. Spectating, frankly, is just easier all round.

But Jesus wasn't calling spectators; he was calling participants.

First in his sights, v18, seem to have been two brothers, Simon, called Peter and his brother Andrew. "Come, follow me," says Jesus, "and I will send you out to fish for people."

Well, I don't know how you would have responded had that been you, but I think I would have wanted to know a bit more about what would be involved before really committing myself.

A point about the sketchy nature of this job description is well-made by commentator John Proctor: "They join an enterprise with no premises, no pension scheme and no obvious business plan. Even the uncertainties and dangers of the fishing trade look better than this."

Peter and Andrew seem, though, to have had no such worries. One minute there they are, casting their nets into the lake ... and the next, everything's packed up – or perhaps it wasn't – and they have left it all behind to follow Jesus in order to fish instead for people!

Well to be fair, this may not have been Jesus' first encounter with these brothers. It may be that he had met them previously. And so perhaps the leaving of their fishing nets may not have been quite as dramatic as first appears. Nevertheless, there's no denying, it was decisive and it was speedy.

And it's a not dissimilar story, v21, with two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets, when Jesus called them. They, too, immediately leave their boat and their father – I wonder what he thought! – to follow Jesus.

Jesus' call to participate was not limited, however, to those who would become his twelve disciples. Jesus seems to have called all sorts of people to participate.

Our Bible reading today ends at v23, "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and illness among the people."

This is really an introduction to much that follows in Matthew's Gospel, which will tell us more of Jesus' teaching, proclaiming and healing ministry. And so we'll say nothing more for the moment, save to say that Jesus again was clearly wanting people to engage with the fact that in him the kingdom of heaven was drawing near.

A call to repent. A call to participate. In the time that remains let's consider what the Lord, through these words, may be wanting to say to us here this morning.

First...

1. The call to repent

Today is the third Sunday of Epiphany, and so perhaps I can get away with talking about a moment of epiphany of my own ... many years ago. I've had more than one such moment, but this is one of them.

I was working in my previous parish and pondering the nature of church life. I found myself asking a question, 'Why in churches do people sometimes behave so badly? Why do they sometimes behave in such an ungodly way?'

And the answer I came too was that sometimes I think people have not really faced up to this call to repent. Yes, they may believe in God. Yes, they may be part of a church. But somehow this radical call to repent has eluded them.

In fact, you may be interested to know that it was as a consequence of this thinking that I started running the course *Christianity Explored* which, in my view, is stronger on the topic of repentance than is *Alpha*, a course I also very much appreciate.

My friends, we all need to repent ... to repent of deeds that are contrary to God's purposes, for sure. But just as much, particularly in respectable middle-class congregations, to repent of ungodly attitudes, ungodly thoughts, ungodly words.

In one sense, of course, such repentance is a once and for all turnaround that we choose to do at a point in time in response to the call of Christ. But in another sense, it must be ongoing as daily we repent of anything that is contrary to God and his purposes for us.

Let me ask directly this morning: Is there anything of which you need to repent? Something you are conscious of that you know to be wrong but which you are continuing in? My friends, Jesus' call to repentance is for you today.

"Some people do not like to hear much of repentance," said some godly old saint. "But I think it is so necessary, that if I should die in the pulpit, I should desire to die preaching repentance; and if I should die out of the pulpit, I should desire to die practising it."

The call to repent. And then, second...

2. The call to participate

Now let's be clear, here. I am not primarily talking about a call to participate in the life of the church, although undoubtedly the call to participate rightly includes this. I am talking more broadly about Jesus' call to participate in his kingdom project ... which in practice means serving him with the whole of our lives.

Not long ago we had a series of five Sundays here; we called them our 'Frontline Sundays'. Any who were here on those Sundays will be in no doubt that God calls us, not simply to serve him in church, but in all the other key places we find ourselves: in our workplaces, amongst our families, with our friends, at clubs or societies, with our neighbours, the places where we do voluntary work.

Is that something you are up for ... even this year? To participate in God's kingdom project, demonstrating the love of God in all that you do? Speaking of Jesus as and when you can, telling people the good news that God loves them and has a purpose for them, that Jesus died for them, that God sends his Spirit to bring strength to their life? And serving him in all ways possible, giving freely and joyfully of your time, and not simply allowing others to do the work that is rightly yours?

Well it's almost the end of January and so feasibly too late for any new year's resolution. However, perhaps we can nevertheless resolve, even today, to be those who are ready to respond to Jesus' call to repent and to participate. After all, and to quote CS Lewis, "You are never too old to set another goal or to dream a new dream".