

Light in the Darkness

Matthew 4:12-23

At first glance this morning's Gospel is all about Jesus calling a few disciples.

But I want to show that the real message is a very simple one, and much closer to home.

It's this. God loves you. We've all heard it before. These three simple words encapsulate our understanding of God. God loves us. But how do we get this good news from today's story about Jesus calling the disciples?

Two weeks ago, Pastor Aldi told us how, in baptism, God calls us his beloved.

We are his children, who are loved fiercely, overwhelmingly by him. And like any parent, our Father wants to be in relationship with us. With God, it is a special kind of relationship, one where nothing is hidden, where truth is revealed, where truth sets us free.

And so we come to this beautiful picture of Jesus coming as a light in the darkness. He is fulfilling that ancient prophesy from Isaiah of a new light, a light that, like a beautiful morning, brings joy. A light to overcome the shadow of death.

But do you see the connection? Bringing relief from the dark is not all that this light does. God wants nothing hidden; and this light exposes what we have been hiding in the darkness. Those nasty, shameful parts of ourselves that we desperately try to keep hidden, even (or especially) from those closest to us. The light of Jesus exposes us for who we truly are, deep down inside. And who are we? We are a complex mix. We are, on the one hand, created in God's image. And, on the other, there are all of those nasty, shameful bits. Saint and sinner.

Now, why does God want to expose us like this? It's not what you might first think. God does not want to shame us. Our God is the God of second chances, a God who loves us, even as we are.

So shining the light into our lives is not to shame us. That's not the end, not the purpose. Jesus doesn't just leave us to dwell in self-reflection and navel-gazing. He invites us into so much more.

Here it is, in verse 17: Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." Now, repent does not just mean saying sorry. It's not about shame or embarrassment. Jesus' call to repentance is an invitation to healing. When we repent, we ask God to end all that is old in us, and to begin something new. The light shines into our darkness, making us aware of our deep needs and prompts us to respond to Jesus' call to repentance. Jesus is calling the world (and us) to return to relationship with God.

He meets the world where it is at; broken, despairing, in darkness, just as he meets us where we are – broken, despairing, in darkness. He reminds us of who we are – people who were created to be in relationship with their maker - and he calls us back to that identity.

It's not a call just to say 'sorry'. It is a call turn back to him, to change our lives, change direction. And it's a radical reorientation, one that we are called to, each day. To choose once again to return to relationship. Even if we have been attending church our whole lives, and perhaps especially if we're starting to feel a bit complacent about the story, it remains a daily choice to accept Jesus' invitation, to turn back to the God who loves us.

And each day, Jesus is the new light shining, showing us a new way, a new path.

Now, this illumination is not just a narrow-beamed spotlight shining into our own individual darkness. Instead, it is a powerful floodlight that shows us the world through Jesus' eyes.

In this light, we see the pain of others around us. For the kingdom of heaven that Jesus speaks about is a place where good news is proclaimed and where the sick are healed.

We hear and cannot ignore the cries of those who are in need – the poor, the homeless, the sick, the dying, those fleeing persecution, those trapped in violence.

But once again, it is not just about showing us these things. Jesus is not finished with us yet! He calls us again into more – he calls us into ministry with him. As if it were not enough to hear that God loves us, he also trusts us – trusts us with being part of his own saving work. He calls to us, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people".

What a daunting call that can sound like! Jesus first calls us to follow him. To Simon Peter, Andrew, James & John this meant leaving all they knew behind and spending time with Jesus – travelling with him, listening to him. Sounds a bit like the repentance we talked about earlier, doesn't it. Relationship. Relationship with Jesus, formed by listening to him, trusting him, travelling with him, learning from his example.

This is what we are called to do in following Jesus – spending time with him, building relationship through the word and prayer – letting the word, the logos, Jesus, dwell richly in our hearts each day. Constantly turning back to him as the shadows in the darkness try to confuse us, telling us that the shame or pain that we feel deems us unworthy of God's love. And each day, God reclaims us as his own, calling us by name,

calling us by our baptismal identity - "Child, you are mine".

Then we get to the fishing part! The thought of witnessing, or evangelising can send waves of fear through many of us. Fishing for people. For some reason when I hear this phrase my mind immediately jumps to street evangelists I've seen at Flinders St station and I begin to break out in a cold sweat. Is that what fishing for people looks like ???!

The good news is what comes next in verse 19.

Jesus does not say "Follow me and if you learn enough, and I consider your skills to be adequate, and you meet all the KPI's required for this job, then you can be fishers of people". No. He says "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people". There are no exception clauses – Jesus does what he says and it is in his power that we act – it is not what we know but who we know that makes the difference. We can see this with the original disciples – a motley bunch who never seemed to get it quite right. And yet Jesus chose to work with them! And I actually feel grateful when I look at the disciples: how often I feel just as motley, and never seem to get it quite right. And yet Jesus chooses to work with us, knowing who we are!

We don't need to be experts fishers, and we don't need to worry about the outcomes.

And we needn't be concerned if others think the message about the cross is foolishness.

Anyone who fishes knows that no matter how experienced you are, you cast out your line hoping that a fish will bite – it requires faith. As fishers of people we too are casting out our nets in faith and ultimately it is Jesus who makes us fishers of people. He gives us the right things to say and the right things to do to help others in their faith journey. It can be as simple as mentioning to a friend in need that you will pray for them. And it is Jesus who provides the catch.

So this is why the real message in today's gospel is the simple one: God loves us. God sees us as we are and loves us, wants to be with us. As Jesus called his disciples, so the Spirit calls us. Jesus shines light into the darkness, and calls us to repent, to turn back to the relationship that God offers. And God not only loves us, but he trusts us to join in this ministry, and becomes fishers of people, allowing Jesus to work through us.

May his kingdom come. Amen.