

It's that Sunday again: the "fishers of men" Sunday. Yesterday we had fun with the children talking about what that meant, and making bendy fish. Our order of service has a little graphic of fishermen with fish in a net, and we are all settling down for the inevitable sermon about fishing as a Christian obligation.

If you were looking forward to that – tough luck! If you were not looking forward to it, you're reprieved. I'm not going to talk about fishing at all. I'm going to talk about an entirely different idea, that was in both readings today.

**“The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light.”**

These have to be among the most beautiful words we hear at Christmas: the prophet Isaiah talking about the light of God coming into the world. It fits so well with the whole message of Christmas. The words are so comforting and reassuring: the light came into the world and everything was made right.

But it didn't work out that way. For a little while at Christmas the peace and tranquillity of the light lit up the world. The words of peace and reassurance warmed our hearts. Joy settled on the world. But it didn't last.

Not long after Jesus was born, his family had to run away to Egypt to avoid the murderous hands of King Herod. Not long after Jesus was baptised, he was out in the wilderness struggling with the devil. Not long after he had won that battle, he had to escape from another King Herod, who had already arrested John.

A bit of a break would have been nice – a chance for Jesus to settle into this new role of teacher and preacher; a chance to test it out and get used to it. But that was not to be: right away he was in danger. The authorities were already trying to shut down. So, he left. He went from Nazareth to Galilee, to start there instead.

Matthew's gospel makes a big deal about it being Galilee that Jesus fled to. In case his audience had missed his point, Matthew quoted from the ancient scriptures to remind them of its significance. But he changed the quote a little. Accuracy in translation is always a problem for us, but accepted wisdom is that Matthew made a change, and since we can assume he wouldn't get it wrong by accident, we can only assume he wanted to make a point.

Just to be sure that his audience realized exactly where Jesus went after John was arrested, Matthew described it precisely the same way that Isaiah did: this was the "Land of Zebulun, the land of Naphthali," it was "on the road by the sea, across the Jordan." This was "Galilee of the Gentiles." Not a Jewish village, but a town where people from all nations and cultures traded and mixed. The same place Isaiah talked about. And now Jesus had gone there to begin teaching.

Isaiah was writing more than 700 years before Jesus was born. The people living in these lands had had some pretty awful times. Their country had been overrun by the Assyrian armies. The northern half had been reduced to ruins, and the southern half only survived because its king gave up their religion, their wealth, and their culture, and accepted occupation. The armies of Tiglath-Pileser had devastated Israel and crushed the people. *(And doesn't that be add insult to injury: not just being destroyed, but being destroyed by someone with a name like Tiglath-Pileser!)*

When Isaiah wrote his little poem of celebration, the end of the dark times was in sight for his people. The land was their own again. Their new king was a genuine descendent of David. The future looked bright and promising. The people of God were free again. The people who had walked through dark times, sometimes in despair and sometimes in hope, were walking into the light at last.

Now, fast forward 700 years to when Matthew was writing, and what do we find? We find the people of Zebulun and Naphthali, in the land called Galilee, in the

dark again. Their country was occupied again, by an even bigger and more ruthless conqueror. Their king called himself a Jew, but flagrantly ignored Jewish law and was even more brutal with his own people than the Romans were. Everyone was struggling to survive. The Roman occupiers were cruel. The temple leaders were corrupt. Life was miserable and hopeless.

These were the people Matthew was talking to. Matthew wanted to remind them how God had delivered their ancestors from terrible times before. The light that had shone for them and seen them through the bad times in the past, was not just still with them, it was now with them in a whole new way. The light of God had come to them this time in human form.

Isaiah described the people of his time as people that “**walked** in darkness”, but Matthew described the people of his time as a people that “**sat** in darkness.” Sitting in darkness is so much worse than walking in darkness! Walking in darkness may be difficult and unpleasant, but as long as you are walking, you are still going somewhere.

Sitting in darkness is total despair. People who sit in darkness have given up all hope of ever getting out of the darkness. People who sit in darkness have given up hope that there will ever be an end to the darkness. They are too disappointed, too discouraged, too demoralized and disheartened to go on. People who are walking in darkness can be shown the way to the light. People who are sitting in darkness need to have the light come to them.

We all have to deal with darkness at some point in life, and we can become so overwhelmed by it that it knocks us down and we find ourselves sitting in the dark. It is then that the light needs to come and find us, to carry us through and get us back on our feet again so that we can walk out of the darkness.

And the light does find us, if we are willing to see it. It may come to us through the loving hug of a friend, the gentle touch of a caregiver, the kind words of a stranger. It doesn't make the darkness go away; but it reminds us that the light is still there. It is when we are at our lowest and our saddest that we most need to be prepared to hear words of peace and reassurance, to feel the touch of love.

There will be days in our lives when we desperately need to be on the receiving end of that light, but there will be many, many more days when we need to be on the giving end: when we need to be the friends who hug, the caregivers who touch, or the strangers who offer kind words. As a Christian community, the greatest gift we can give to one another and to the world around us, is to be reflections of the light to those who are in darkness.

Isn't that the first thing our education as Christians teaches us? You remember: *.....Jesus bids us shine with a clear pure light, like a little candle burning in the night. In this world of darkness, we must shine.....*

In this world of darkness, we must shine. Shine for those in sorrow; shine for those in need; shine for those in pain; shine even for those who created their own darkness and those who refuse to see the light. Shine for those who sit in darkness and walk with those who walk in darkness.

Amen.