

We could probably call this ‘overlap Sunday’. Our Old Testament reading and the gospel have a lot in common. The Epistle deliberately echoes the week’s Christian Unity theme. If you were here last Sunday you might have noticed that both this week and last week the gospel was about the same thing: Jesus calling his first disciples. It’s probably a bit much to expect you to remember what I preached about a month ago on Christmas morning, but there is an overlap there too. We’ll come to it.

We’ve just heard part of the prophecy of Isaiah and part of Matthew’s gospel. In fact we’ve heard part of Isaiah twice – Matthew actually quotes it. It’s part of his habit of pointing out exactly how Jesus’s words and actions fulfil the prophecies in the Jewish scriptures, to demonstrate that he really is the Messiah. The verses he quotes are about light – enlightenment – coming to the people of Zebulun and Naphtali. Zebulun and Naphtali don’t crop up much in our readings; in fact this is one of the very few mentions of them which isn’t simply part of a list of the twelve tribes of Israel. So why are they so important here, and why does Matthew call them ‘Galilee of the Gentiles’? This is ancient history. Zebulun and Naphtali were part of the ‘Northern Kingdom’, Israel, which had been overrun by the Assyrians nine hundred years earlier. The people had been driven into exile and the land repopulated by immigrants from further north, and then there had been influxes of other people including, eventually, returning exiles. This resulted in a very mixed population. On the other hand the ‘Southern Kingdom’, Judah, hadn’t been conquered until two hundred years later, and the Judeans had come back from exile pretty quickly, reconstructing their faith and their holy books and rebuilding the temple. So the Judean Jews were the arbiters of correct belief and practice, and were clearly superior to the mixed-up Galileans (the people of Zebulun and Naphtali) who, if you were a Jerusalem pharisee or Sadducee, couldn’t really be considered proper Jews. (Do I hear a Christian Unity parallel somewhere in the background there?)

So when Jesus heard that John the Baptist had been arrested, he left the proper Jews in Judea and went to live in Capernaum, in ‘Gentile Galilee’. This was absolutely the wrong side of the tracks. Even worse, Matthew says he found his first disciples there. They were Jews, but they were Galilean Jews. Matthew hammers the point home. It would be rather like the Church of England ignoring all those nice Oxbridge colleges and recruiting its bishops from coalmines in Doncaster and docks in Toxteth. It’s these people, the ones who are officially sitting in darkness, to whom the light has come. They are the ones who are sufficiently open-minded to hear and understand the message, and it is in this religiously dubious area that Jesus begins his ministry.

At first sight, last week’s and this week’s gospels seem to be quite different. How can they both be describing the same thing? Last week, two of John’s disciples (one of whom was Andrew) came to Jesus and spent part of a day with him. Andrew then went off to find his brother Simon and bring him to Jesus. This week, Jesus takes the initiative and calls Simon and Andrew while they are fishing, and shortly afterwards repeats the call to James and John. We tend to see these events as isolated incidents, and forget that they were taking place in the middle of everyday life. The fishermen, as well as lots of other people, could have heard John preaching on several occasions and been sufficiently impressed to become his followers. They could also have heard Jesus in the synagogue and on the streets many times. It’s likely that they had already, as in John’s account, spent some time with him. Perhaps they already

felt they knew him to some extent and could trust him. So when Jesus called to them while they were fishing, the call was unexpected but the person calling them was quite familiar.

Which brings us to the overlap with my Christmas sermon. One point I made then was that the shepherds were very ordinary people in the middle of doing a very ordinary job. They weren't important or educated or socially significant or even, probably, very clean. But they were the people to whom God first sent the angels to break the news that Jesus was born. Now here we are in a bustling lakeside town where, among all sorts of other activities, some men are fishing or mending their nets. Peter, Andrew, James and John are also well down the social scale, making a precarious living which depended on the weather and their skill in finding enough fish. They are Jewish, but not the right sort of Jews. They go to synagogue and will have had a basic religious education, but they aren't orators or scholars. It's no surprise that we see them, later in the gospels, struggling to understand what is going on. But when Jesus turns up in the middle of a perfectly normal day and says: 'Follow me', they do. Once again, God had come to people where they were, he'd broken into ordinary lives, and those lives would never be the same again.

God calls unlikely people and he does it in unlikely ways. We've already committed ourselves to follow him, because we are Christians. He will continue his calls to us to serve him. It won't usually sound like God calling; it might be a friend or the boss, someone in the street or something you saw on TV. It won't usually be a big, dramatic, holy call; not 'Go and be a missionary' but: 'Go and make some sandwiches' or 'Why not talk to those people over there?' He is calling us to help build his kingdom by making his world a little more just, or giving practical or moral support, or increasing someone's understanding, spreading some love or demonstrating some of those fruits of the spirit that St Paul describes. Peter and Andrew followed and fished. They saw some of Jesus's greatest miracles when they were fishing, and fishing was what they went back to when they were in despair or in difficulties. That's our calling too: to see God at work in the world and to live our daily lives in ways which bring light to people who are still in darkness.