

Sermon 26 January 2013 Isaiah 9:1-4 Mt 4:12-23
‘Call: A Challenge and a Gift’

Prayer: Oh God, our light in former times, be our light this day. Help us seek you and know the beauty of the gift given. As we go about our usual routines, challenge us with your call to follow you. We pray in the name of Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Challenge and gift – that’s what we have been given to think through today. Having had longer to think about all this I have decided to approach it from the challenge of our own calling and the gift we have been given to share...

The gift is what begins for us today in the Isaiah passage. The real time date for them is in the last third of the 8th Century B.C. Assyria (which while we have people who can call themselves Assyrians, Assyria no longer exists) But in Isaiah’s time it was **the dominant** power from the northern outskirts of what we know of as Iraq to southern Egypt and even more out wide! And its armies swept through, or along the ‘way of the sea’, Via Maris in the Roman tongue. This is the road from the north to the south down this side of the Mediterranean Sea and right over modern Israel’s lands...

In an unflattering way the land of God’s people, was simply between Assyria and its goal of dominating Egypt... So as it swept down, Assyria invaded the northern parts of what we call Israel. The two tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali are mentioned because they were the first of the tribal lands to fall under the rod of the oppressor.

It is this harsh reality that Isaiah is speaking into with his prophecy. These people knew what darkness was. They knew the harsh realities of war, of occupation, of economic disaster, of betrayal of values, family, love and faith... Their world had crashed – or was going to, the shadow of upheaval, terror, loss... was long and heavy and where was God?

Isaiah – as prophets do sees beyond the ‘now’ and into a time when God would send a light; when their people would grow in number and strength and they will have justice and know joy. The yoke of oppression would be broken by the light of God’s presence. This is a prophecy of **great promise**, of faithfulness from God despite the ‘darkness’ of the present; a promise of punishment for their oppressors with **the righting** of wrongs and **justice** for the people of God; the promise of the establishment of the reign of God, the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth. A clear contrast between the gloom and anguish of oppression and the positive prophetic message of a secure future when God’s reign is renewed. cV

Of course having just travelled through Christmas, the **next** few verses of this prophecy are very familiar to us- when we heard how “a Son will be given to us, and the government will be upon his shoulders...” ***But today the gift begins*** as the Light which will honour the Gentiles.

Such is the prophet’s confidence in God that he speaks of the **future re-establishment** of God’s reign as if it had **already come about**. In anticipating this joyful state of affairs the prophet encouraged his original listeners, and now us, to delight in the saving work of God and to offer God the praise that he richly deserves.

Encouraged despite what is happening in our lives or maybe encouraged because of what is happening in our lives – we are to offer thanks and praise because the gift of light was to honour the Gentiles, and that’s us! It is **our gift**, light to **honour us** and show **us** the way to walk that will increase our numbers and our joy, lifting the yoke of oppression from our shoulders. It makes sense for the followers of Jesus who understand how close this prophecy fits his ministry, to believe this gift of God was Jesus.

It is in Jesus and his ministry that we see how the light of God breaks injustice, lifts sadness, and removes oppression, provides the vision of another – a better way of life... It is as Jesus says, in him the kingdom of God, or the way God wants things to be for us and the original design for our living – **in Jesus** this kingdom comes near. Counteracting, lifting the darkness that encroaches on our lives.

In Jesus, this kingdom comes to us, *according to Matthews understanding* – and it is brought to us by the ‘locals’ who heard Jesus preaching, saw Jesus in action and followed him. The scholar W Brueggemann says it is most likely Isaiah expected a new King to be the light against the Assyrian darkness and it is Matthew who took over Isaiah’s prophecy and applied it to Jesus.

The timing of these things according to Matthew is that Jesus heard that John the Baptist had been imprisoned and coming from the tribal lands that most need good news, (Zebulun and Naphtali) Jesus began to preach. Brueggemann ^{*}*Jesus issued his imperative summons to repent.

The repentance to which Jesus summons his listeners is a bold recognition that the world has changed. It is now under new governance! His rule is one of light, freedom, joy, and well-being which has displaced the old governance of exploitation, oppression, fear, and anxiety. The new counteractive work of God began in Jesus through his ministry, dramatically transforming the world. Dark to Light.

Isaiah gave his prophecy to a people and in a time far removed from us – and most of us can only barely relate to what they were suffering in the big picture... If we decrease the frame and speak of how we know darkness encroaches on our lives – and how important we know light to be for us, we identify closely!

Matthew gave in his words the picture of how that light is concentrated through Jesus for the world, gentiles included. Matthew also starts his picture identifying for us those who will continue to shine this light after Jesus has gone. ^(Loader) In fact those very ones ‘called’ to Jesus will be the first to bring this light of God into the dark places in and beyond Galilee.

There is a double load with the reflection on ‘call’ this week, within the challenge and the gift. We respond ourselves to the challenge Jesus call out: “come and follow me”, and it is a life long journey growing in faith, understanding, love and trust with many shadows – and sunbursts on the way. We also accept the challenge of allowing the light to shine through us into the world – like Jesus. We ourselves are not the light, it is not our light even – we have no control on God.

We accept the challenge, recognise the fundamental need for light in our world and that it is up to us to share it. Not only in an educational big picture of faith growth – but also in bringing the kingdom of heaven near. Who is it in our community that needs the light of heaven to lift their darkness, right wrongs, fight injustice, provide a safe place for, feed their tummy as much as their soul?

We have been given a gift of priceless worth are we up to the challenge of sharing it? SPPT PJW Laying Up Treasures In Heaven p.33
A favourite modern parable of mine:

One night a father decided his son was now old enough to go out to the barn to feed the horses. The boy, however, told his father that he was afraid of the dark. The father stepped out onto the porch with the boy, lit a lantern, gave it to his son, and asked him how far he could see as he held up the lantern. “I can see half way down the path,” said the boy. The father directed the boy to carry the lantern half way down the path. When the boy reached the point, the father asked the boy how far he could see now. The boy called back to the father that he could see the gate. The father urged the boy to walk to the gate, the father asked the boy how far he could now see. “I can see the barn,” came the boy’s reply. The father encouraged the boy to go to the barn and open the door. When the boy finally shouted back that he was at the barn and could see the horses, the father simply called, “now feed the horses,” and stepped into the house. Amen.