

“What is good about the Good News” a sermon preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church Dunedin on 22 January 2017. The texts were Matthew 4:12-23, Isaiah 9:1-4, 1 Corinthians 1:10-18

There are places of such significance, we only need to hear their names, and our minds immediately make associations.

I am going to name some places, and ask you to note what comes into your minds when I name them.

- Waitangi
- Gallipoli
- Aramoana

It was no less so for people at the time of Jesus. There were places which when mentioned, awakened associations.

To us, two thousand years later and in a country remote from Palestine, they mean nothing. The names Zebulun and Naphtali. They were in the reading from Isaiah. They were the region of the two northern most tribes of Israel. And in 722 BCE the Assyrian Empire annexed these two tribes.

By the time of Jesus, Zebulun and Naphtali had come under Roman domination. Being in the north, they were border lands. Eugene Peterson calls them “crossroads”. Their location meant that when armies invaded, Zebulun and Naphtali were the first and last to bear the brunt of invasion. Theirs was the land across which soldiers marched first when they sought to conquer. And theirs was the last land across which soldiers retreated.

Here on a faraway Island, we don’t really know what borderland feels like. But in Europe and parts of Asia and North Africa, people know what it feels like to live near a border of competing powers.

I remember having a conversation with a friend in Hungary. She spoke fiercely of how a major part of Hungary became annexed to Romania. She was determined that one day it would be returned. So Zebulun and Naphtali were borderlands.

Today, if Jesus was seeking the same, he would make his home in the north of Syria or the edge of Turkey or the West Bank or the border between India and Pakistan.

Where people sit in darkness.

Where people sit in the region and shadow of death.

It is at the crossroads, Jesus announces he is bringing hope of transformation. With great boldness he announces he is the fulfilment of Isaiah's hope. And it is not to one of the known cities of the region, to Sepphoris or Tiberias, but to little known Capernaum. It is in a small agricultural and fishing village, that Jesus begins his movement and seeks his first disciples.

It isn't in Jerusalem, the centre of power and the place of influence. And it isn't from just any trade that he calls disciples. Fishing is more than just another occupation.

Fishing was gruelling, back breaking work involving nights spent out on boats on a temperamental lake, the hauling of great nets, the constant labour of repair, the prospect of an insecure livelihood made leaner by quotas and taxes, required by the regime of Herod Antipas. There was great demand for Galileean fish products across the Roman Empire. So the government saw in the taxing of fishing a ready source of income for the Empire and the Emperor's dreams. Rome claimed full and exclusive rights to all waters and any resources collected from them.

This meant that Galilean fisherman had to pay for the right to fish. These taxes were often paid in kind as a portion of the day's catch. Taxes were collected whether the fishing had been successful or not. This heavy taxation, along with the capital costs of fishing boats and nets, rendered Galilean fishermen barely able to subsist. So fishing was exhausting work that presented almost no opportunity for economic success.

This sort of taxation generated resentment toward empire in Galilee. The only weapon poor people had was to abandon their work in protest at taxation and imperial domination.

It had happened in 37 AD when Gaius ordered his image to be placed in the Temple. Gaius knew there would be a reaction, so he positioned a legion of soldiers to resist an uprising. But what the people did was not violent. They resisted by walking off their fields. Knowing that their surplus fed the Roman army, the people went on a strike and refused to plant their crops. They left off tilling their ground. They didn't harvest the produce. They were prepared to die rather than to see the dedication of the statue.

Local Roman authorities became worried, Josephus reports, that "banditry would grow." And it spread. It grew to include mass mobilisations of people in the streets of Jerusalem and in cities and towns around Galilee. The strike brought widespread attention to a major social and economic and theological concern about imperial domination.

So Jesus locates himself in the borderlands between empires. He locates himself with the trade of those who bear the brunt of oppression. He locates himself among people who knew how to be a movement of resistance, among strikers, willing to leave their trade, willing to die, in the face of the power and threats of the Empire.

And the movement of Jesus is triggered by the arrest of John the Baptist. So when he says “Repent”, he means turn from being part of the imperial system. Leave behind that world, that economic system, that unjust taxation, that oppressive rule. And when he speaks of “the kingdom of heaven”, he does not mean some realm in the by and by, some heaven up there.

He means Zebulun and Naphtali and Capernaum and Galilee as God intended them to be.

He means an economic system that gave fishers what they deserved, as God intended.

The kingdom of heaven, or to use other words, the empire of God, is coming to people who live at the crossroads, in borderlands, but not by a marching conquering army. Rather in the kind of people movement that people already knew, which Jesus claims as from God.

And when he says “Follow me and I will make you fish for people”, he is saying – “You who are among the most oppressed, you who bear unjust treatment, become part of the movement of God, for the kingdom of heaven, the way of God, of just dealing and fair taxation. It is very near to you.”

Paul takes up that same gospel for the Corinthians – be united in the same mind and with the same purpose – around the cross which locates God in the same place, among the weak.

When I was with UnitingWorld, my previous work, every year we would have a team retreat. And among other things, we would practise our elevator speeches and then we would critique each other.

An elevator speech is what you say when someone gets on the ground floor of a lift, or elevator, and says – are I see you are from UnitingWorld. What do you do? And you have from that time until the third or fourth or tenth floor to answer.

So what is your elevator speech if someone said to you –

I believe you go to Knox Church – what do you do?

Might you say, we seek to follow Jesus. We are part of a movement he began that seeks to make this world what God intended it to be. We know the darkness in our world.

Amid the darkness, we hope. And we work to enable everyone to be fairly treated, tax to be just, marginalised people to be included, the earth to be valued.

We believe that is what God intends, what God is doing around us.

We want everyone to be part of that movement, so we seek to live the Jesus way and recruit others to the way.

It isn't easy, so we gather to learn, and to encourage each other on the way.

That is what Knox is about.

Are you interested?

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growing in courage to live the Jesus way



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