Third Sunday after Epiphany Sermon 26 January 2014

Isaiah 9:1-4
Psalm 27:1-9
1 Corinthians 1:10-18
Matthew 4:12-23

These sermon notes were prepared before the sermon was delivered and so do not transcribe the actual sermon word for word

In the first reading today Isaiah speaks about change, but he is not talking about the future in the way that we so often do, he's not talking about a better way, or of course corrections, he's not suggesting a change of government or of policy, nor is he talking about the latest smart phone apps or other technological shifts. Isaiah speaks of a change that comes from our deepest knowing and our deepest being; it is a movement from darkness into light, what some other traditions refer to as enlightenment; an insight or awakening to the true nature of reality.

The same reading, as per the lectionary, was also used as one of our readings for Midnight Mass; and that is because the primitive church saw that the 'light' of Isaiah's prophesy was to be found in the person of Jesus, the Christ, and the Messiah.

This primitive understanding is also evident in Matthew's gospel; in fact this is where the classical (mis)understanding comes from. Matthew, once again, seeks to narrate, or more correctly construct the life of Jesus into the scene, the backdrop, of Isaiah's prophetic vision.

Matthew wants to see Jesus as the fulfilment of Jewish expectation; he has encountered Jesus as a light in the darkness, but he wants that light conformed within the familiar Hebraic tradition. And perhaps this is a pseudo-repenting that we ourselves are familiar with; it looks like change, but really there is still a holding on to all that is past..
The theological term for this is "having your cake and eating it too".

The gospel serves to remind us just how difficult it is for us to make changes within ourselves, and yet the same gospel also invites us to follow a different path.

If we skip to the second reading we have another cameo of church life; and another example of enlightenment being derailed.

The church community in Corinth had embraced Paul's teaching and had accepted a call to repent, a call to change that was symbolised in baptism. But then we read that there were quarrels as different groups associated themselves with the different leaders that had baptised them.
The change that Paul had brought to light at Corinth, was so easily derailed as individuals clung to their own place of power, missing the very enlightenment that Paul had attempted to preach, his teaching was of a new order, it spoke of a "power of God" that was not particular to any one group but that had an orientation to the whole.

The readings and the stories that they give us today are very familiar, for we will all have experience of change, and we all know our resistance to change..

Going back to the gospel we might find a clue, and an empowerment, to more fully embrace change.

The first few verses 12-16, are very much Matthew's scene setting and Matthew linking Jesus to the prophetic vision of Isaiah.
If Matthew were constructing his gospel for us today he would see these verses as unnecessary, for we don't need convincing that what is revealed in Christ is the fulfilment of what Isaiah spoke of and both were aligned to the expectation of small group of people following an old, primitive and exclusive belief system.

What we might get is a reference to Isaiah;
"*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness on them light has shined.*"
And that reference for some of us would awaken the icon of the Nativity and bring to mind that which is revealed in the Christmas narrative.

Then we could read on and hear what Matthew narrates about the Jesus he encountered; and what he remembers of Jesus' teaching.
"*From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." 18 As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea for they were fishermen. 19 And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." 20 Immediately they left their nets and followed him.*"

Together these two each offer us a glimpse of enlightenment:
The people HAVE seen a great light
Light HAS shined
the kingdom of heaven HAS come near
for they speak of a reality not of some future utopia…….

The call to repent is the call to live in light of this very reality, it is not a call to hope that by waiting for death and being good you will be whisked off into a place called heaven.

The call to repent is the call to live in light of the reality that *the kingdom of heaven HAS come near;* and our baptism is our symbolic alignment with this enlightened insight.

These readings are so much clearer when we take of the distortions of the primitive church, hear them again:
The people HAVE seen a great light
Light HAS shined
the kingdom of heaven HAS come near

Now for the "So What?"

And let me preface this by saying this is not my teaching for you to accept or reject. The traditional model of Church where the priest knows best and will guide the "*plebs sanctus dei*" into that enlightened place is not our experience here…
Here, we are very much seeking together, for all that I preach I seek to hear for myself.

So, what do we get from the gospel that tells us; *the kingdom of heaven HAS come near?*

Let's have a look at the world we inhabit, look at our reality:

From the Guardian on Monday:
As World Economic Forum starts in Davos, development charity claims growing inequality has been driven by 'power grab'.
An Oxfam study reveals that *the 85 richest people as wealthy as poorest half of the world.*
85 individuals *across the globe share a combined wealth of £1tn, as much as the poorest 3.5 billion of the world's population.*

It is a staggering statistic; and worthy of more contemplation, remembering that none of us here are in the poorest 3.5 billion.

Now what have we just been reading:

The people HAVE seen a great light
Light HAS shined
the kingdom of heaven HAS come near

Jesus, and Isaiah, call us to another reality, we can continue to inhabit and contribute to the world view that is under consideration in the luxury of the Swiss mountain resort of Davos, or we can live out the reality of the nativity.

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.", or as Gandhi paraphrased the same insight: "You must be the change you wish to see in the world."

Today we are offered the invitation of Christ,
Don't worship me,
Follow me.