

FIGHTING IN THE LIGHT

Isaiah 9:1-4

Matthew 4:12-25

J.R.R. Tolkien once wrote a short story which he titled “Leaf by Niggle.” It was a sort of literary self-portrait, and is about a little man named Niggle who is a painter in a minor sort of way. He had visions in his head of vast vistas he would like to paint, and particularly of one special tree, and its surrounding country and the distances behind it. The problem was that first of all Niggle had many other things which he had, reluctantly, to do; and secondly, he was far better at painting individual leaves and flowers than the big picture that was in his mind. So it was that the details he worked on didn’t always fit well into the bigger picture, though they could be very good in themselves.

When Jesus came onto the scene in first century Palestine it was as though people were pulled away from their own worrying, niggling little details, to see a bigger picture. In the way Matthew tells this part of the story, it’s all about expansion.

First of all Matthew talks about Jesus’ new home. He left Nazareth, making an effective break with his old life in the family home, and he makes his home in Capernaum, one of the small lake-side towns by the Sea of Galilee. This move, probably made for practical reasons, reminds Matthew of Isaiah’s prophecy - one which we usually read at Christmas time. Jesus has move into the old territory of Naphtali and Zebulun, and so now in the story we can expect to see that those who were in darkness are bathed in light. Matthew stops his quotation at that point, but his Jewish readers would know well that Isaiah goes on to talk about multiplication, about things growing: “You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy.” This is what the light does: it brings people joy.

This is important to remember because now Jesus takes up the burden of John the Baptist’s message and begins to call people to repent. We know all about repentance, of course. It’s what we have to do every time we sin. Yes indeed. But that is only one narrow meaning of the word.

In Galilee, Jesus was in a part of the land which was awash with various political and religious and religio-political movements which all had one thing in common: to get rid of the Romans and make the country independent and pure once more. Some, like the Pharisees, called for people to simply live as though the Romans were not there; to live entirely and only by the tenets of Scripture and their legal interpretations and expansions. Others, like the Zealots, were guerrilla warriors, hiding in the hills and by the roadsides, ready to attack especially the Romans, but also any whom they suspected to be in any way involved with them.

When Jesus proclaims that the Kingdom of heaven, or the Kingdom of God is at hand, he is explicitly lining himself up as a revolutionary. All the revolutionary movements claimed to be restoring Israel to being God’s Kingdom. And yet he is the one who calls out “Repent!”

We sometimes like to go out for a walk on the back road, either towards Luggate or towards Fountainhall. When I say we go for a walk, it’s not uncommon for the parents to walk while the children take a bike or a scooter. He doesn’t do it now that he’s a big boy, but for a while, Andrew had a bad habit of rushing off ahead, and no matter what you told him about keeping in to the side, he always ended up in the middle of the road. Now it’s not a busy road, but there is a little traffic on it, so when this happened, invariably we would see a car coming, and one of us would have

to run after him shouting “Get out of the way! Get in to the side!” The fact that he is still with us is testimony to the facts that he did eventually obey, and that the drivers have all been understanding. We shouted “Get out of the way” but in Jesus’ terms we could just as well have shouted “Repent!”

“Get out of the way!” Jesus is saying. “Change your way of doing things!” And he is saying it to the revolutionaries of all sorts. None of them are fighting the same battle that he is. They are fighting a much smaller battle, really no more than skirmishes here or there, and all of them are fighting using the weapons of darkness. They may be actually engaging in armed struggle, or they may be trying to live with eyes closed to what is around them, or by hemming people into small patterns of life - all of it is the work of darkness, and not the work of the light. All of it is small-minded, thinking only of the here and now, of the people of Israel, of one time and place, but Jesus, who uses the weapons of light, is opening up a far bigger picture.

The light shines, grows, and frees. Jesus calls the ordinary people, the fishermen, and they are attracted to the light and the freedom, and so, although they do not know just where it will all lead, they leave their nets, their occupations, their security, and go off with him. And so the light grows.

Jesus goes all around Galilee - that hotbed of insurrection (being further from Jerusalem, revolutionaries could be bolder there) and he teaches and proclaims good news. This is the weapon of the light: to shine with good news and to bring joy. Jesus enacts that good news by healing every disease and every sickness. And the light shines and grows. Jesus’ fame spreads through the Roman province of Syria (not the same as the country which bears that name today). They bring him their sick - those in pain, those infected, those who are afflicted in their minds and their souls, those who are immobilised in various ways and the light shines and the darkness passes and joy, great joy spreads wherever Jesus comes.

Niggle worries away at his leaves and flowers, always hoping for the time to finish the picture, always hoping he can do justice to what he glimpses with his mind’s eye. It is only after he is removed from his studio that he is able to see what he was really trying for, as he is taken to a country where he sees the tree he has imagined, alive and growing. And then, far from despairing at the inadequacy of what he has attempted, he is filled with wonder and joy and he lifts up his hands and exclaims “It’s a gift!”

Too often Christians worry away at doing the bits we have on our minds. We work and we worry and it never seems to come right, and there is little joy in our faith. And Jesus knows that what is needed is that we repent. We need to get out of the way and let his love and joy and growing light transform what we see as our little work. For it is joy that is attractive to others. It is good news which brings people into faith, not bad. It was because of the good news spoken and acted out that great crowds followed Jesus, coming from as far away as Jerusalem and beyond the Jordan.

Too often Christians get caught up in fighting the darkness with the weapons of dark, not of light. Recently there have been a spate of stories in the media about Christians demanding rights - the right to wear a crucifix at work, or a chastity ring at school. This week I read of a Registrar in England who is demanding that she be exempted from having to conduct civil partnerships, because she doesn’t personally believe in them. I read of one leading Christian suing a Bishop because she claims she has been discriminated against as the “wrong kind of Christian.” I know it’s not true in general, but the picture you could get of Christians these days is that we have

become whiney! We pick away at this or that, looking for restrictions to be placed upon others rather than celebrating freedom. We demand our rights, when in fact if we think that we are being asked to do something really wrong we should be prepared to simply up and leave our jobs, trusting that God will provide. That is faith. It is always spelled RISK, just as it was for the fishermen who went off into the unknown with Jesus.

I do hope that as Christians we never come across as whiney, because that is a sign of small-mindedness, and Jesus certainly was never a whiner. Even at the end, when he was arrested and beaten and abused he made no complaint. If he had been a whiner, no one would have followed him. It's not a focus on minor grievances which attracts, but the joy of good news.

We live among people who need, so badly, to see a great light. They live in the gloom of rootless moralism. Good people, no doubt, but with no foundation to their morality. We live among people who live by political correctness, rather than love. It is a calculating way of living: showing respect but demanding respect in return.

Jesus came to sweep away such calculation in the joy of his good news. His coming was like the sun breaking through the wintry clouds. Wherever he came people were able to lift up their heads and see farther than before, realise that there was more to life and it was better and more beautiful than they had imagined. Jesus called them to joy.

He still calls us to joy, and if there is little joy in your Christian life - in your prayers, in your worship, in your service, then maybe it is time to pause, to stand back from routine and from busyness and ask God to show you the bigger picture, the good news which still shines light around the world, which still attracts people in their thousands and millions to follow Jesus.

Niggle was a little man who worried over leaves. It was only when he saw the bigger picture that he could rejoice in his creativity, the gift of his art. At the end of the story the tree that he tried so hard to capture is being used to lift others out of themselves. When Niggle hears news of this he laughs and laughs till the mountains ring. It was only when he shared his vision and the beauty of his gift with others, instead of keeping it hidden away in his shed, that he was able to relax into joy.

God grant that we, like Jesus, be those whose only weapons are those of good news and love, of light and joy. God grant that as we live in the joy of Christ, others may see and come to know that joy for themselves.