

Epiphany III (22.1.17) Isaiah 9:1-4; Matt.4:12-23

Zebulun and Naphtali

In the centre of Birkenhead, where I served my curacy, there is an old church. It sits on a major road junction, with thousands of motorists going past every day, and it sits there as a testament to decline and failure. The church closed perhaps fifty years ago, and now the walls are covered in graffiti, the windows are long smashed, the roof partially caved in. You can see that it was a fine building. You can imagine that it once had a fine congregation. But now it is home just to birds and rats and all who need to hide in the darkness. The Christians of Birkenhead go past it and are reminded daily of what once was, and of its decline and fall.

You can probably think of places which make you feel the same. And if you can, then you know what the words Zebulun and Naphtali meant to a first century Jew. Zebulun and Naphtali were areas in the North of the Promised Land, the land flowing with milk and honey, the Land the twelve tribes had yearned for in the Book of Exodus, the land then hard won and settled. The Land where God had promised to be with His people, and where once He was, in glorious years gone by. And then came the Assyrian like a wolf on the fold, with their armies, and their programme of deporting the locals and planting their people, their culture, their cities. The promised land become a haunt of foreigners and their strange ways; and God's people fallen away – either hopelessly ground down under the boot, or just absorbed into the pagan culture. The people of the South looked on and shuddered. Zebulun and Naphtali was their ruined church; their standing sign of decline and fall, home now to birds and rats and darkness.

And home, now, to Jesus of Nazareth. Do you remember that strange line at the beginning of John's Gospel, when Nathaniel first hears of Jesus and asks in disbelief, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth'? Nazareth, and Capernaum where Jesus moved, are in the heart of Israel's ruin. But it is *there* that the Word becomes flesh and dwells among us: not in Jerusalem, not in the Temple, not somewhere ready for Him, but in the heart of failure. Truly, it is the people who sat in darkness who have seen a great light, and on those who dwelt in the shadow of death, light has dawned.

The Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ is this:

Whatever the desolation, whatever the failure, whatever the ruin we find ourselves in, in his Incarnation Jesus of Nazareth, God the Son, has planted Himself right there.

He did it first by being born and living in the midst of Israel's failure.

He did it again by being baptised – coming with all those who needed to hear and repent and change, even though he did not. Going under the water, He put himself right into the heart of all our sin and failure, and said 'I will bear that'.

And then He did it finally on the Cross, crucified outside the city and between two thieves. He plunged Himself into all the pain and shame and futility of a criminal death, and said 'I will bear that'.

And then, on the third day, He rose. It was as if all the darkness, all that failure, all that ruin which had been piled upon him, which he had borne – it was as if, somehow, the light and goodness and joy which He was stronger even than all that. You can pile all the sin of the world onto Him, and somehow his love, and joy, and goodness simply burns through it all. That which seems so final, so heavy, so dead to us - in Him, is suddenly not. It's as if a great big stone placed on a tomb is suddenly, effortlessly, rolled away.

And why that is Good News for us, is that resurrection is catching.

The joy, and the goodness and love that is Jesus of Nazareth, that great surge which burned up sin and failure on the Cross and flared out from his empty tomb, is catching.

It may take some time, indeed we know it will take a long time, but that great surge of God is destined to catch all things, *all things*, and if they will it, to fill them, to turn them around, to make them like itself: to make them joy, and goodness, and love. As St. Paul says, as in Adam all die, so in Christ – and much more so – shall all be made alive.

And that means there is no church so ruined or divided.

No part of your personal life so over-run with failure and rats.

No body or mind so broken by disease or guilt.

No corpse so cold, lying in the graveyard around this building.

Quite simply no corner of reality which the resurrection will not catch, will not fill, will not enable to be love, and joy, and goodness.

It is not that all *must* be saved. There must always be the possibility for people to say 'no', to choose for whatever reason to shut themselves to the great surge of God. But my goodness, you have to try hard. Because of Jesus, hope and glory have been planted deep in the heart of every single human situation. They are bubbling up within, bursting to be free. And so we approach *every* human situation, however bleak it seems, confident that even here, there is hope. *Even here*, there can be glory. It may take a long time, it may take beyond a lifetime, but *even here*, the Kingdom can come. That's why I can take funeral after funeral after funeral and not sink in despair; it is, quite frankly, why I can live at all.

What to do about all this? Well, the first thing is simply to rejoice and sing. The first mark of the church should not be that it is running around doing lots of good things, trying very, very hard. The first mark should be joy. This is staggeringly Good News we have been given. If you can believe this – and I know, I really do know, that for many it is a struggle – if you can believe this, *everything* is changed and it is changed wonderfully for the better. So the first thing is to rejoice. Give thanks. Let your heart sing.

And the second is to ask yourself: well, where is my Zebulun and Naphtali? Where is my ruined church? Where's the person or the thing or the part of my life that I can hardly bear to look at, because it means death and failure and misery? What has been over-run with rats? *Slight pause*

And I'm not asking you to imagine that somehow that thing isn't really all that bad, or even that it's going to change anytime soon. Some things are really, really bad, and some things are deeply, deeply stuck. There are wounds, frankly, which will not heal until the end of time. The dead in that churchyard will not rise till the end of time. But rise they will, and heal they will. And so will *your* Zebulun, your Naphtali. And that makes all the difference in the world for how you treat it.

So perhaps it is time to pray for that person who hurt you so deeply you have never recovered.

Perhaps it is time to tell someone the truth you've never told, that you even hide from yourself.

Perhaps it is time to let your bottled up grief out, to weep and mourn. You can do that. Joy and goodness will still, always, be bigger and stronger.

Perhaps it is time to start acting as if all the people we are tempted to write off – the stupid, the disabled, the prisoner, the unborn – perhaps it is time to start acting as if those people are what they really are: because of Jesus, our fellow sons and daughters of God, filled with hope and glory, destined to share His Kingdom with us. Think like that, as you go about your daily life, as you spend your money, as you vote. Act like that.

And then truly, on those who dwell in the region and shadow of death, on all of us, light will begin to shine.