

Sermon preached by Rev Rachel McDougall

St Paul's Canterbury

Epiphany 3A

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Changing direction to follow the light of Christ

When Jesus heard that John had been arrested he withdrew to Galilee.

The beginnings of Jesus' life that we have celebrated at Christmas time so often seem like magical fairy tales bathed in light and glory and love joy peace and hope. They seem removed from the complex mix of life we experience.

Except it wasn't quite like that – around Jesus' birth is the threat of Herod wanting to find out what the magi know, followed by the flight of Jesus to Egypt and Herod killing as many infant boys as he could.

Jesus' beginnings were not much different to the mixed reality of life now, the mixture of chaos and order, difficulties and delights. The beginning of Jesus' public ministry is the same.

It was no walk in the park.

He begins his ministry in the context of threat and the handing over of John the Baptist to the Romans. Jesus began in the shadow of John's arrest and impending death.

When Jesus heard that John had been arrested he withdrew to Galilee.

What would Jesus have thought when he heard of the Baptizer's arrest? And what did he do?

A military man or a super hero would've gone into battle to rescue their friend by whatever means possible, even if it took violence – and perhaps that's what the Jewish people wanted of their messiah.

Yet this is not what Jesus does.

In Matthew's gospel whenever he is threatened he doesn't fight it with violence and aggression but withdraws and goes somewhere else and keeps following God's call.

News of John's arrest does not stop Jesus from doing what he is called to do.

He changes direction but keeps going.

In the face of risk and threat Jesus changes direction and continues to follow God's call.

Matthew's quote from Isaiah is pointing that out – that Galilee of the Gentiles the land of Zebulun and Naphtali becomes the place that the light shines.

Jesus does what is not expected – he moves away from Jerusalem, and the seat of religious authority and starts his ministry in the back blocks of Northern Israel – a place where many people would have wondered 'why on earth would you go there? – like going to the back of Bourke.

Galilee wasn't purely Jewish; it was a region with a mish mash of people – all sorts.

A revolt against the Romans had arisen from there that had been put down brutally.

Jesus begins his ministry in the context of threats in a backwater town and says Repent for the kingdom of heaven has drawn near.

In other words: 'Change your life. God's kingdom is here' (The Message translation). Change your life as God's desire is to be with God's people and the party has already started. God is here, reality is changing.

Jesus has changed direction and begins to call others to do the same.

Change direction God's presence is here now.

God's light is shining.

The people who sat in darkness are now seeing a great light, the light is dawning and is present in Jesus, the word made flesh, God with us.

Jesus' response to John's arrest is to change direction and to keep going in saying words of hope and life, sharing good news and calling others to do the same.

He wastes no time in calling fishermen and healing all who come to him. He starts his ministry not in the place of power and privilege but with ordinary people and amongst the vulnerable in complex times.

Jesus begins his ministry and invites others to be transformed.

It is not about guilt and weighing people down, but on encouraging people to turn to the light, to change direction and be open to new light and new life, to see God at work.

Walter Brueggemann puts this very well when he talks about this change. He talks about transformation as a process of orientation → disorientation → re-orientation.

Jesus has experienced this as he goes through his life and shows us the way forward. In Jesus we see the radical nature of God's love, a God who is always moving toward us.

God moves towards us and meets us in unexpected places with unexpected people in unexpected ways.

I wonder what change God is inviting you to make in response to God's presence and love.

As we stand at the beginning of another year with difficulties and challenges what is the change that we are invited to live into?

How do we live in the light of God's love?

This week Jacinda Ardern announced her resignation as prime minister of NZ. She came to power at a time of unrest. On the world stage there were many leaders who were using their power unwisely.

She caught world attention because she showed a different model of leadership – not one of domination and control, but a leadership that embraced kindness and compassion.

Her response to the terrorist act at the Mosque demonstrated her commitment to kindness and compassion.

This generated a great deal of negative response on social media and led to many death threats. She did not lead perfectly, she did make mistakes but she did continue to embody a way of being kind, of being loving of reflecting light.

I think Jesus' call to change direction is about keeping on following the light of Christ.

It is to follow his lead in being people who are loving, compassionate and kind despite what is going on around us.

God's light is here and is with us. May we respond to that love and be open to hear God's call to follow and be open to God's light.

*There is dignity here-
we will exalt it.*

*There is courage here-
we will support it.*

*There is humanity here-
we will enjoy it.*

*There is a universe in every child-
we will share in it.*

*There is a voice calling through
the chaos of our times;*

There is a spirit moving across the waters of our world;

*There is movement,
a light,
a promise of hope.*

*Let them that have ears to hear,
hear.*

But

Look not for Armageddon,

Nor listen for a trumpet.

Behold, we bring you tidings of great joy;

The incarnation.

Philip Andrews.

*God of Blazing light,
through the power of the cross you shattered our darkness,
scattering the fears that bind us
and setting us free to live as your children.
Give us courage and conviction
that we may joyfully turn and follow you
into new adventures of faithful service,
led by the light that shines
through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.*