

Jesus begins his ministry (Matthew 4.12-23)

Today is one of my favourite days of the church year! Because in our gospel reading today, we begin to accompany Jesus as he begins his ministry.

The gospels don't tell us what time of year it was, but I always think of it as spring. We imagine the Galilee: green with young wheat, brilliant with wild flowers; tiny soft leaves opening on the vines. The figs and mulberries are budding and there are white flowers on the grey-green olive trees. Dwarf Palestinian oaks are beginning to give shade to labourers in the heat of the day, and at dusk, they are full of birds.

And Jesus is full of hope as he starts to preach. 'Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near.' He moves to Capernaum and makes it his base, and there he finds his first disciples. Peter and Andrew, casting their nets; James and John, mending theirs in their boat. He challenges them to follow him, and they do. They're young, ready for adventure; ready to step out of their lives and into an exciting new cause.

Jesus becomes quite a well-known figure in Capernaum, and although he falls out with the Pharisees, it's obvious that he also has a lot of respect in the town. He dines with local tax collectors. The Roman centurion in charge of the nearby garrison comes to trust him, and in Chapter Eight he asks Jesus to heal his slave, who is paralysed. A bit later, the leader of the synagogue comes and begs Jesus to revive his daughter, who has died (9.18). It is perhaps to the Capernaean that Jesus tells his parables of the Kingdom.

These are good days for Jesus – shining with promise, bristling with miracles. There are a few clouds on the horizon. Not far away, John the Baptist is imprisoned, and then executed. There are run-ins with local religious. But there are also thousands of people who come, listen to Jesus, and are touched by him. He must have felt he was doing what he came to do.

The atmosphere is very different from the dark turbulence of Holy Week. I often think that people divide into those who prefer high religious drama – festivals like Christmas and Easter and Pentecost – and those who are happiest when God shines through everyday life. Not that Jesus's life was ever routine, but in the early chapters of the gospel, there is a sense of holiness breaking through ordinary events; a rumour of angels; a foretaste of heaven on earth, which we gradually lose as the net of high politics and cosmic conflict closes around the Christ.

That reminds us of something we sometimes overlook – that the gospels display two, in some ways rather different Christs, one of the early days of his ministry, and one of the crucifixion and resurrection.

In the early days, Jesus is very much the herald of God's Kingdom. He preaches to turn people to God. He heals to show that God's Kingdom is near. He urges people to trust God. Everything he says and does points away from himself, towards God. After the resurrection, everything points towards him as God. To the early Christians, Christ doesn't just prepare people to be forgiven by God; he engineers their forgiveness himself by dying for them. They put their trust not only in God, but in Christ as Son of God.

As it happens, in early Christianity, the second Christ came first. When Jesus was crucified, his followers fled in despair and his mission fell apart. People thought that whatever they had

believed about Jesus must have been wrong. Then when Christ appeared to them, risen, on Easter Day, they were electrified. It was the resurrection that turned the disciples into a movement – a powerhouse of faith and evangelism. And it was the resurrection that they preached.

This is Peter, in his very first sermon, in Acts: ‘Jesus of Nazareth, a man revealed to you by God with deeds of power, wonders and signs ... this man ... you crucified and killed... But God raised him up, having freed him from death ... and being exalted at the right hand of God ... he has poured out the Holy Spirit as you see and hear... Therefore ... Know that God has made him both Lord and Saviour.’

Christ, had overcome death. No power on earth could hinder the power of God. And those who put their faith in him would receive his Spirit and share his eternal life.

It is mainly the crucifixion and resurrection that Paul preaches too, in his letters. But the gospels are different, because as time passed, people began to remember more and more not just how Jesus died and rose again, but how he lived, and they began to feel that his life was just as important as his death. And so, the gospels tell us about Jesus’s travelling and speaking, and praying and healing, and anger and love; and how they affect everyone he meets. And so today finds us walking with him along the lake front of Capernaum, calling to local fishermen’s sons to come fishing with his Father for human souls.

Of course, the two phases of Jesus’s life have much in common. In both he is devoted to God. In both he speaks and acts for God. In both he puts his own life on the line. And the gospel writers went to some trouble to interweave them. There are places in the early chapters where Jesus appears in all the glory of the Son of God. Like the Transfiguration, or the moment in Matthew when Jesus says, ‘All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no-one knows the Son except the Father, and no-one knows the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.’ (11.27) And right up to his death, Jesus is wholly human: faithful, hopeful, determined even when he’s downcast.

But the difference of emphasis between Jesus as pointer to God and Jesus as God is a real one, and it has led to endless debate over the years, about the exact nature of Christ and how the two aspects of him relate to one another. And there have been times when people would call each other heretics for preferring one aspect to the other.

Nowadays, we tend to accept that both phases of his life and both aspects of his nature exist, and are equally essential. Today, and in the weeks to come, as we walk with Jesus through the Galilee, what matters more is that we shall feel very close to God. Today, we heard that the Heaven has come near. We saw four young men step out of their lives onto what will become a lifelong and life-changing path of faith. We saw people come to Jesus to be healed – and staying to hear the Good News of the Kingdom. And we stand in imagination in the green fields of the Galilee, where a needle’s eye has opened between heaven and earth, and ask ourselves, will we also step through it? Amen.