

“Urban Jesus” – Mat 4:12-25 – Jan 27, 2008

A real estate agent will tell you “it’s all about location, location, location” and I guess the same seems to be true for gospel writers. All of the gospel writers fuss with the location of the start of Jesus’ ministry. So much fussing, in fact, that we do actually get “location, location, location” – that is, there are several different versions of just where Jesus started out his teaching, preaching, and healing, and how he rounded up the first of his disciples. Last week for example we discovered that the first two disciples, Andrew and Peter, were originally followers of John the Baptist, and turned to follow the Lamb of God. John was less than specific about the location, but it seems to have been along the south part of the River Jordan, down in Judea.

Today, in Matthew’s gospel, we discover a different version of the rounding up of the first two disciples, and the location is considerably north of John’s version. (Actually, John’s version is considerably south of Matthew’s, since Matthew’s gospel is earlier than John’s, but you get the picture I’m sure.) Matthew is not only concerned that you know the location where Jesus started his ministry, but also wants you to know that the location was neither accident nor coincidence. He spells out in detail that the location was a fulfillment of something the prophet Isaiah had said many centuries before.

That of course would be the first prophet named Isaiah, a contemporary of another prophet, Nahum, after whom the town of Capernaum was named. “Capernaum” means “village of Nahum” – and so Jesus moving to the village of Nahum was for Matthew another sign of Jesus being the Messiah, a sign the Jews could not – in his opinion – have missed if they knew their scriptures. That of course is a central theme throughout Matthew’s gospel – that the Jews were presented with all the necessary evidence of Jesus being the Messiah but nevertheless rejected him. Later in both his account and in Luke’s gospel as well Capernaum is severely condemned, along with Chorazin and Bethsaida, for the lack of response there to the mighty acts and deeds done by Jesus. Mind you, the lack of response there was in one sense not all bad, especially when you compare it to the response he eventually got in the big city of Jerusalem!

When most of us hear this familiar passage, we come away remembering the famous “I will make you fishers of men” line – a great line, although the images that are evoked are not all flattering, which may explain why the image of Jesus as shepherd eventually took over. (Did you know that a common French Canadian word for “sucker” as in a gullible person is “poisson”, or “fish”?) However, I was intrigued by the location that Matthew set for the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. “Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea ...” So many questions come to mind from those two short sentences! Where did he withdraw from to go to Galilee? Couldn’t have been Nazareth, because that little village is smack in the heart of Galilee. What happened while he was in Nazareth? Why did he leave there? Was Capernaum really his home town? Seems to be the case, because even Mark reports that when Jesus had returned there after a healing and preaching and teaching tour of the area the word circulated that “Jesus was home”. And of course the big question of where had Jesus been all the years up until now?

Those questions of location are important, at least in part because our home town experiences tend to shape us, to provide some of the basic characteristics of who we are and how we relate to others. Of course, it is not an absolutely determining process in that we do have and do make our own life choices, but still those early experiences during our formative years have an indelible impact on who we turn out to be. Take me for example ... you can take the boy out of the northern mining town, but it’s almost impossible to take the northern mining town out of the boy!

There are some basic and profound problems that derive from identifying people with location, however, problems of rejection, exclusion, and even racism. When we assume or prejudice people as having certain traits or characteristics simply because they come from a particular location, we can fall

into those traps – and we all do to some extent. It doesn't have to be international – people from the West Coast think people from “back East” are pushy and arrogant; people from “back East” think the West Coasters are in a pot-induced trance of relaxation and disconnection from reality; people from across the country think Newfies are “charming” (how devastating is that word?!); and what about attitudes about people from the far north; or First Nations? This phenomenon of “othering” gets progressively worse as we look at people from foreign lands – unless of course it is the foreign land from which our ancestors came!

I believe all this has some significance in our understanding of Jesus, and what Jesus means to us. The picture of Jesus that most of us carry is the one we picked up in Sunday School, images of a somewhat simple, back-country boy. We have learned to assume he was a carpenter because he was known as the son of a carpenter, and we tend to think of him as a rather rural character, plodding the dusty back roads of a nowhere province on the edge of the Syrian desert. I'm not so sure any more that those images are accurate. They could be, if he had spent all his years in Nazareth, a remote village of 200 people set deep in the hills in central Galilee, but the depth and breadth of Jesus' teaching causes me to think he spent many years learning in a much larger academic environment that would have been provided by that tiny village. And when you consider that even though Capernaum was not terribly large – about 1,500 people in Jesus' day – it was still on the edge of a rich farming and fishing area, and lay just off the main inland road that traversed the great rift valley. Trade and commerce traveled that north-south corridor for centuries between the major areas of the fertile crescent and the Nile delta. That Jesus was multi-lingual was almost a certainty, as the language of commerce throughout that whole area had been Greek for some three hundred years, the language of legal matters was Latin due to the area being a Roman province, the language of faith was Hebrew, and the language of the local population was Aramaic. Jesus did not belong only to the dusty back roads but to the city as well – he was clearly an “urban” Jesus as well as a rural and suburban Jesus.

But there's another key piece of information that Matthew provides in his quote from Isaiah – “Galilee of the Gentiles.” Right from the beginning Matthew signals that Jesus both lived among and delivered his message of reconciliation with God to people who were not just Jews but Gentiles as well. He went throughout all of Galilee teaching and proclaiming the good news and healing their illnesses. And people of all backgrounds responded. Although it's not included in the Lectionary reading, the concluding verse 25 describes the varied collection of peoples who heard his message and responded: “and great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.” Jews and Gentiles alike, peoples not only from many locations but from many backgrounds, cultural and religious, gathered together to hear him, to follow him, to see the love of God at work in this special man.

Of course we see later how the message continued to spread not only in that region but throughout much of the world, from Caesarea to Corinth to Rome and beyond, with the Gentile world both hearing the message of inclusion and proclaiming it to all who would listen and respond.

In that affirmation that the good news of reconciliation with God we find our own comfort and challenge. We in turn are part of the peoples from many backgrounds and locations who have heard the message of reconciliation, the proclamation of God's love made so clear in Jesus, the Christ, the Son of Man and Son of God, and believe we are included in that embrace. But that task that began in Capernaum by the sea is not finished, because we in turn having been included are now called, like Andrew and Peter and James and John and all the others, to proclaim that same message. Called to proclaim it not just to those who come from the same places we come from – places of location, culture, background or situation – but to people from all places, all locations, all circumstances. Called to proclaim here in the city the message of love, reconciliation and inclusion through our own loving, reconciling, and including – and from the gospel testimony we can be confident that Jesus is with us, every step of the way. Thanks be to God!