

“An Invitation To All People” – Mat 4:12-25 – Jan 22, 2017

On the screen you can see the slide of a construction scene ... it's not our new building but rather a picture of a “life-size” Noah's Ark that was built for a theme park in Kentucky last year. You of course recall the Genesis story of Noah's Ark, a vessel into which animals were loaded “two by two” to be saved from the Great Flood? The theme park project cost some \$100 million dollars, and is impressively 510 feet long, 85 feet wide, and 51 feet high, and according to the promoter and builder Ken Ham it is constructed based on dimensions derived from scripture (reminds me of the old Bill Cosby routine with God giving instructions to build the ark and ends with Noah asking, “right ... what's a cubit?”). The idea of the project and indeed the whole theme park (apart from making a profit) is to attract biblical literalists – people who take every detail in the Bible as factual and unarguably true.

Biblical literalists have a number of problems beyond being taken seriously by other people, not the least of which is a huge difficulty trying to avoid or otherwise deal with obviously conflicting texts in the Bible, and will usually turn themselves into pretzels trying to find a solution. They cannot concede that the various authors represented in the Bible sometimes had the story related to them differently and occasionally even presented an incident in a modified way to underline or emphasize a particular theological point they were trying to make. It's as though conceding even one such point would cause literalists' whole belief system to collapse.

We have such an example of a conflicting text in today's reading from Matthew's gospel. Perhaps the conflict is not too apparent if you were either absent last week or not listening then, or if you only read today's readings. We see several of these apparent issues in today's reading from Matthew's gospel in which we hear about the calling of the first disciples of Jesus. The first issue relates to exactly where this incident of calling the first disciples occurred. 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 actually do get “location, location, location” – that is, there are several different versions of just where Jesus started out his teaching, preaching, and healing, and even how he rounded up the first of his disciples. For example, you may recall that last week we heard in John's gospel that the first two disciples, Andrew and Peter, were originally followers of John the Baptist, and turned to follow the Lamb of God; i.e. Jesus. The evangelist 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 deeply 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, and so he spells out in considerable 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 still

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 in those locations to the mighty acts and deeds done there by Jesus.

I think most of us come away from hearing this familiar passage 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. (As my brother-in-law used to say, "If fish are supposed to be 'brain food', how come they're so easy to catch?") However, I was more 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. We know him as "Jesus of Nazareth" so what happened while he was in Nazareth? Why did he leave there? Was Capernaum really his home town? That seems to be the case, because even Mark reports that when Jesus had returned to Capernaum after a healing and preaching and teaching tour of the area the word circulated that "Jesus was *home*". And of course there's the really big question of where had Jesus been all the years up until now?

Those questions of location are important, not least because we tend to make assumptions about people based on their home town. And while there is some kernel of truth that we are shaped by our environment in our formative years, there are some basic and profound problems that derive from identifying people with location; problems that include rejection, exclusion, and even racism. When we assume or prejudge people as having certain traits or characteristics simply because they come from a particular location, we can easily fall into those traps – and we all do to some extent. It doesn't matter whether we're talking about people from West Vancouver or North Surrey, the location causes us to prejudge people. The effect seems to increase with distance – 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. When ethnicity and cultural differences are included this phenomenon gets even worse – take for example attitudes about indigenous and First Nations peoples! This phenomenon of "othering" based on home towns often gets progressively stronger as we look at people from foreign lands – unless of course it is the foreign land from which our ancestors came!

You may by now be asking why I so often spend time pointing out niggling problems in the biblical texts. I raise these points because I believe all this has important impact in our understanding of Jesus, and especially in our understanding of what Jesus means to us. The picture of Jesus that most of us carry is the one we picked up in Sunday School, an image of a somewhat simple, back-country boy. We have learned to assume he was a carpenter because he was referred to 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 highway 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. The concluding verse in our reading even 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. It brings to mind the birthday card that Gillan got for me and which so many of you signed – a card showing Jesus tweeting, and commenting, “12 followers so far; sweet!” Images of a modern-day flash mob (spontaneous gatherings triggered by an invitation via social media) come to mind, with clamoring hordes of people following Jesus, all excited by this man of God.

We also see how his message, a call to all peoples to “come, follow me” 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 also 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 is for all peoples – Jew and Gentile alike – 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 take comfort that we are included in that embrace. However, 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 to all peoples 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, whether we be in the city, in the country, or anywhere in between. Thanks be to God!