

**Is 9:1-4; Matt 4:12-23; 1 Cor 1:10-18 – Jervis**

Those of you who have seen *Lalaland* or maybe watched the Golden Globes will know the song *City of Stars*. The song toys with the double entendre of 'star' by having Emma Stone and Ryan Gosling singing the song while dancing on a starry night on a hill overlooking Los Angeles –the city of stars.

A city full of people who are or who want to be stars. The light of the stars in the sky and the lights of the city full of people wanting to make the news. Different kinds of light.

The song's wisdom is that the real light that everyone is looking for is – as the song puts it 'a look in somebody's eyes to light up the skies...a voice that says, I'll be here and you'll be alright.'

The real news in people's lives is the light of love. And as the movie zeroes in on two impecunious young artists who can't get work, but whose love for each other –at least initially – is deep and supportive, the movie directs our attention away from the bright lights of LA and its stars - to the real news of this lovely love.

The song and the movie celebrate romantic love – and in my view do so in a magical way.

Our scriptures today probe God's love. The faithfulness, the profundity; and the mystery of God's love. Especially the mystery of the particularity of God's love.

A constant claim of our scriptures is that God loves the world. God is the creator of all there is and so loves all there is. And at the same time, God has a special love for the family of Abraham and Sarah.

The Bible begins with the expansive narrative of God's creating all there is out of darkness and chaos. And then it quickly zeroes in on God's call of a particular person – Abraham. God singles out this one man and his wife Sarah to be the parents of a family with which God will have a special connection.

The point of this special connection is not that God loves only this family – the one that comes from Abraham and Sarah and Isaac and Rebecca and Jacob and Leah and Rachel. The Biblical authors are convinced that this local news is also global news. That the light of God's love for the family of Abraham, and that family's love for God, is the light of God's love for all people.

That God's love for Israel is the way God communicates God's love for the world/ the way God draws all people to know the love of God. Abraham and Sarah's descendants will be as numerous as the stars in heaven.

The people who let the story of God's choice of Israel seep into their beings come to see that the love between Israel and God is to be the model for all people; it will be the way that all people come to be in love with the God who loves them. In fact, the Biblical hope is that all people will eventually be the people of God.

And then there will be no more reason for weapons or war; no reason for walls or for pitting one nation against others; no reason for sorrow or sadness. Because when all people recognize that they are loved by God – that they are all the people of God - then the one creation of the one God will be at one with itself.

This conviction and hope is the chief vein in scripture; it leads to scripture's heart.

At the heart of scripture is the throbbing love of God that says to specific people and through those specific people to all people - I'll be here and you'll be alright. The news that the scriptural authors announce over and over again - in various particular historical contexts - is that God's faithful love is shining there in whatever specific darkness people are struggling with.

The Biblical writers sew together an astonishing variety and number of local/particular contexts and events – from Abraham in Ur of the Chaldees, to a baby hidden in the Nile, to a shepherd boy, to a baby born in a manger in Bethlehem, to a zealous Pharisee and so on.

The Biblical writers, each in their own way and each in their own historical locations sew particular people and events into a wonderful design – like a fine necklace.

I have a beautiful necklace made by a Kenyan woman from bits of glass and beads that she found on the seashore. Each of these pieces of glass and each of these beads came from some other place. She threaded them together to make something beautiful.

This might be a helpful image for what I am trying to express. Each Biblical author in their own sometimes clumsy and confusing way contribute to the Bible's overall design.

By virtue of recognizing that the light of God's love is shining in their midst in a specific location in time and space; by recognizing that the real news in their particular time and place is not Tiglath-pileasar or King Cyrus or King Herod or the Caesar of the moment.

The real news – the global news – is that the love of God shining in a specific location with its particular challenges and messiness is the love of God for every single person in every single time– it is God's love for the world.

Today we witness Matthew's artistry in sewing a simple moment in Jesus' life into this design. Matthew narrates Jesus' move to Capernaum. A less deeply formed writer might simply narrate the facts – Jesus left his home in Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum and there Jesus proclaimed 'Repent: the kingdom of heaven is near.'

Matthew, however, has drunk deeply from his scriptures and his community's faith. He is shaped to his core by the design of Judaism's faith. And so, Matthew writes (as we have just heard) that Jesus made his home in Capernaum which is in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, in order to fulfill *Isaiah's* words

that in the land of Zebulun and Naphtali, the Galilee of the nations, the people who sat in darkness – in the land of death – might see a great light; so that light would dawn on the people who lived in the shadow of death.

Matthew is sewing the seemingly mundane event of Jesus' move from Nazareth to Capernaum with the main thread of scripture: that thread is God's particular love for Israel as the way God loves the world. Matthew's artistry here reveals the real news of Jesus' move.

Zebulun and Naphtali were the ancient names for what became known as the province of Galilee, or Isaiah's name for this location – the Galilee of the nations. The prophecy of Isaiah that Matthew says is fulfilled was written not long after the Assyrian king Tiglath Pileser III annexed these regions and turned them into the Assyrian province of Galilee. (see 2 Kgs. 15.29; 1 Kgs. 15.20).

Isaiah's hope is that God will shine light into this messy and anguished situation; that the rod of the oppressors will be broken. As we heard this morning, Isaiah expresses his hope for deliverance by referring to another scriptural event – Gideon's defeat of the mighty army of Midian – an event told in the book of Judges (7:15). Isaiah writes: "the rod of their oppressor you have broken as on the day of Midian."

Matthew gives depth dimension to the otherwise unremarkable event of Jesus moving from Nazareth to Capernaum by giving it depth dimension: Matthew on top of Isaiah; Isaiah on top of the story of Gideon.

This artistry can, just like that of a good movie director, serve to focus our minds – call us to pay attention to the real news. Which is, of course, what Matthew says Jesus is doing in Capernaum. "Pay attention/turn around/change the focus of your minds – Repent" says Jesus. "The kingdom of heaven – the active presence of God's light of love - is here."

It is here in this messy and anguished place. In this place that used to be Zebulun and Naphtali 700 years ago. In this place that has for a long, long time lived with oppression and fear. It is here in what is now the Galilee of the nations – a complicated and tense mixture of people.

A great light is shining in this land that has lived in the shadow of death for so very long. Matthew's artistry draws our focus to the real news: The real news is the local news that a single, low-status Jewish teacher in a relatively unimportant town is saying "Repent; the kingdom of heaven is near you."

This is the real news because it is at the heart of the global news that God is here and we will be alright. The global news that God loves the world – every aboriginal and abused woman and homeless street person and illegal immigrant and all the privileged sitting here today – and everyone we think voted the wrong way.

The real news is that the light of God's love is always burning. It just takes our turning around from the fake news and paying attention in order to see it and be delivered by it. Martin Luther King Jr – another deeply formed writer who, like Matthew, sewed the events of his time and place with the main thread of scripture – King put it this way: 'Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate. Only love can do that.'

One of the major topics in conversations that I have been involved with over the past upsetting and confusing months has been the critical importance of distinguishing fake news from real news; and of how easily the purveyors of news become complicit in encouraging the very thing they actually want to discourage - Simply by making it headline news.

This past Friday morning was the sign for many of us of the absolutely essential importance of determining what is real news.

I have a colleague who used to say that the church's task is not to preach the good news; it is to hear the good news. And I think that is so right.

The real news – the good news to which Matthew calls our attention this morning is that the light of God's love appears in a very local, usually unremarkable manner. News about Jesus' move to Capernaum and his words "Repent; the kingdom of heaven is near" was not in the mailbag of any Roman courier.

But this was actually the news that every single human being and every group of human beings really wanted and wants to hear.

God saying, I am here and you are alright.

This is the news we in the church are called to hear and the more deeply we hear it; the more profoundly we are formed by it – through prayer, through worship, through study of our scriptures, through acts of mercy and justice (maybe by marching) - the more beautifully we will show it with our lips and in our lives.

The good news for the world – in Jesus Christ God is here among us, light in the midst of us; bringing all of us each in our own place and time – everyone – to light and life.