

## PLACES MATTER

Isaiah 9. 1-4

1 Corinthians 1. 10-18

Matthew 4. 12-23

I speak to you in the name of ☩ the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

We've come to call it 'the Holy Land'. From the Mediterranean Sea in the west to the country of Jordan in the east, from Syria in the north to the Sinai in the south, travel companies, tour groups and tourists all treat this piece of Middle Eastern property as one unit. This one unit of land is where our Lord walked; and that's what now makes it 'holy'. In our mind's eye, the Holy Land is essentially *one place*, with Jerusalem more or less as its centre; and this way of viewing that part of the world influences the way we read the Scriptures.

The majority of people, when asked, are not particularly bothered about where this or that gospel event took place. One locale is as good as the next; it's all the Holy Land, after all. Jericho or Jerusalem, Capernaum or Bethsaida: the places themselves matter little, compared to the *presence of Jesus in those places*. Unless we are actually visiting Israel as part of a tour group, we generally tend to be more interested in *what* Christ said, and not *where* he said it. I bet that if most of us took a quiz on gospel geography, even those of us who are quite biblically literate might not do too well. 'Where did our Lord meet Zacchaeus?' 'Where was it that Peter confessed Jesus as the Christ?' Many people, off the top of their heads, wouldn't have a clue.

But knowing such answers ought to be more useful than merely helping someone win a game of Bible Trivia. After all, geography is actually very important. *We are shaped by places*. As one philosopher<sup>1</sup> famously said, 'Tell me the landscape in which

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<sup>1</sup> José Ortega y Gasset.

you live, and I will tell you who you are.’ Most of us sense the truth of that. Judging from my trip to France last week, I can vouch that Parisians and those who love in big capital cities think and act differently to those who live by the sea, like we do in Guernsey. *Places matter.*

We may have a hard time describing just how and why that is, but all of us know that places carry certain associations. Yet in the gospels we often forget all this. We shouldn’t, because in the stories about our Lord, place is important. And not just because Jesus, as a real human person, always had to be somewhere. There is more theology involved in a place than we sometimes realise. Today’s appointed gospel passage from Matthew 4 is a good example.

Hard on the heels of his baptism by John and his wilderness temptations, Christ preaches his first sermon upon hearing that John has been arrested, and as he does so, our Lord picks right up where John left off. As Matthew 4 reports it in verse 17, Jesus’s first sermon is a word-for-word repetition of John the Baptist’s sermon from the previous chapter in Matthew (3. 2). On one level, it is good to see Jesus affirming the ministry of John, telling people what John told them: ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near!’ But that’s what John said. Shouldn’t Christ be able to say something more? With our Lord on the scene, shouldn’t he be able to say, ‘It’s not just near, it is now here!’? But no, Jesus echoes John: it’s near, so get ready.

That’s the first surprise about Christ’s inaugural sermon: it’s just a knock-off of John the Baptist’s work. But let us not be too harsh in our assessment of that first sermon. Its message is an urgent and an important one. It is as if our Lord were saying, ‘Look, you need to turn around, so that you are ready to embrace this kingdom, so that you can *hop onto it* instead of getting *crushed by it* as it rolls over you.’ One scholar, in his commentary on Matthew’s gospel, has suggested that a modern paraphrase of Jesus’s sermon is this: ‘Move, because here comes the whole new world of God!’

But the second surprise about Christ's sermon is even bigger: namely, *the place* where our Lord was when he gave the sermon. As soon as Jesus hears about John's arrest, he decides to go north, some eighty miles into Galilee. Christ then moves out of his backwater hometown of Nazareth and settles in at an equally out-of-the-way place called Capernaum, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. In other words, our Lord has gone out into the sticks. Eighty miles may not sound like much to those of us who are accustomed to driving seventy miles an hour on the mainland, but in a day when nothing moved faster than a donkey could plod, eighty miles was quite far indeed. Jesus has taken himself very far away from Jerusalem, from Judea, and from all things religious.

So surprising is this shift in geography that Matthew feels the need to bring in a prophetic heavyweight like Isaiah to re-assure his readers that this move makes some biblical sense after all. And Matthew was right: in a prophetic message, Isaiah did associate God's promised One with Galilee (as we heard in our appointed Old Testament reading). But even those who were familiar with Isaiah's prophecies did not necessarily think that the Messiah would begin his work here, in Capernaum. Why would Christ start his ministry out in the sticks, rather than in a more central and important religious place, like Jerusalem? It didn't seem to be logical.

It may not have been logical; but it was theo-logical! The nearness of God's great kingdom of peace had already been announced in the vicinity of Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup> So our Lord makes a point of proclaiming the nearness of the kingdom also to others, far away from Jerusalem. Jesus has come to this world for the sake of this world: and that means all of it. There are no 'unimportant' places. There are no places where the presence or the preaching of Christ would be 'wasted'. Ultimately, the whole world needs Jesus, and so our Lord begins by making a foray into the wider world.

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<sup>2</sup> By John the Baptist, who, though preaching in the 'wilderness of Judea', drew crowds from Jerusalem, Judea and all the region along the Jordan (Mt 3. 1, 5).

Place matters. Places matter. Every place. And every person in every place. Maybe this was Jesus's way of saying that the kingdom of God is not tied down to a single location, and certainly it cannot be restricted to the spots on the map that we deem to be important. The kingdom can come, and does come, most anywhere and everywhere. In the final analysis, the 'Holy Land' is not just in Israel; every place where the Spirit comes into a person's heart is holy ground.

And our goal should be to keep proclaiming and living out the kingdom until the knowledge of God covers the earth the way the waters cover the seas. Then, it will indeed be true once more to say, 'The earth is the Lord's, and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it'.<sup>3</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Ps 24. 1.