

## ST JAMES' LOWER HUTT – THIRD SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY 2023

### A TALE OF TWO KINGDOMS

In the late 1990s when I was crossing over between the Methodist and Anglican churches I was asked in an interview whether I believed I could keep politics out of the pulpit.

It was a fair question. I was at that time and place a fairly high profile person within a political party and the diocese in question, Waiapu, had found itself in hot water some years earlier when its then bishop Paul Reeves publically joined the Citizens for Rowling movement within the Labour Party, which didn't go down so well in the more conservative parts of what is a largely rural diocese.

So I wasn't surprised the question was asked and I had my response ready to go. I couldn't keep politics out of the pulpit I explained because the pulpit is where we preach the gospel and the gospel is absolutely saturated in politics. What I would try to do, I promised, was keep party politics out of the pulpit, which in itself has been a challenge at times.

I was reminded of that story this week for two reasons. The first quite obviously is that we have witnessed a historic moment in our country's political history. It's not every day a Prime Minister resigns and beyond the wall to wall tributes and abuses of Jacinda Adern there is a very real conversation to be had about what comes next and what her departure means for this year's general election. The second maybe not quite so obvious reason is today's Gospel reading.

As I've said, the gospel is saturated in politics, although in our culture where the subject is one of the three big banned conversation points at many dinner tables it might be sometimes quite hard to recognise that. Matthew's gospel in particular has a strong political undercurrent which isn't surprising given Matthew's overriding agenda to portray Jesus as the fulfilment of Hebrew prophecies, which in themselves were largely based around the geopolitical circumstances of their days.

Let's turn to the reading and a quick recap – Jesus has been born, visited by the Magi who have been sent there by Herod who has made every effort to neutralise what it seems might be a threat to his power base, so Jesus, Mary and Joseph flee to Egypt to escape then return to live in Nazareth. Around 30 years later Jesus rocks up to John the Baptist in Galilee who's preaching repentance and preparing the way, gets baptised, then heads into the wilderness for a significant period – yes, it says 40 days, but that's just bible code for a reasonably long time – which brings us up to today.

John has been arrested so Jesus makes his way to Capernaum in what our reading tells us is the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali – cue the political overtones. Zebulun and Naphtali we might recall were two of the sons of Jacob, Zebulun being born of Leah and Naphtali of Bilah. Leah was of course one of Jacob's two wives while Bilah was the slave of the other wife, Rachel. When the Promised Land is allotted to the twelve tribes in Joshua, Zebulun and Naphtali were given this area, in the west of Galilee, which like all of Israel at the time belonged to someone else and this region in particular continued to see-saw between Jewish and Gentile control for centuries, which is what our reading refers to when Matthew quotes Isaiah describing it as Galilee of Gentiles, the gentiles at that point being the Assyrians but by the time of John and Jesus they were the Romans.

So we're 5 verses in and already Jesus has taken John's place, remembering that John was arrested and made a political prisoner for denying the absolute power of both Herod and Rome, and he's moved to Galilee, the politically controlled land of Roman occupation, and what does Jesus do? He calls people to repent, which in context is to reclaim their rightful place in God's favour, because the kingdom of heaven has come near.

We hear those words through perhaps a lifetime of bible reading and coming to church and they sound familiar and not overly radical, but let me encourage you to listen again. Jesus stands in a place promised to his people by God but which has on numerous occasions been taken over by others, often according to the prophets as a result of Israel's non-repentance, he's replacing John who had been growing very popular and challenging the status quo, and he's surrounded by the occupying forces of the Roman Empire and he's telling people to put God first, not Rome, because what has come near to them is a whole different kingdom to the one represented by Herod or the Empire. Can we start to hear the political undercurrent in these words?

But then Jesus goes further – he calls four fishermen, Simon, Andrew, James and John, and tells them to put down their nets and follow him, which to us might sound like a nice origin story for the disciples, until perhaps we remember that as fishermen these four were key parts of the imperial economy. Rome funded its expansion by controlling and taxing local resources and as fishermen they would have been licensed to fish by Rome in return for taxes and levies, so when they turn their backs on their boats they turn their backs on Rome. And then Jesus travels throughout Galilee, the land of the Gentiles, teaching and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom – this kingdom that most definitely isn't the one in front of people's eyes – and curing every disease and sickness among the people, sickness

and disease that would have largely been a result of an occupation that bled the land of resources leading to probably between 70 to 90 percent of the population living in some form of poverty, with all its associated impacts on health. So when Jesus goes about healing the sick he's really relieving the effects of their political circumstances and restoring them to their rightful position as envisaged by Isaiah when he foretold a land where people could enjoy abundant good food while the blind receive sight, the lame walk, the lepers cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the poor hear good news. It's a promise of the absolute opposite to what people were getting from Rome and so once more, politics.

For Matthew these are foundational verses that set the scene for the rest of the gospel and introduce his core themes which will be quite literally fleshed out in the person of Jesus from this point on. And at the heart of those themes is the concept of the *basilea* of heaven, a term that we can interpret as kingdom or reign or realm, but whichever translation we use for Matthew this is crucial. Remember Matthew is the gospel that really introduces us to the Lord's Prayer, with that important line "*on earth as it is in heaven*". What Jesus does, and what all those who follow him do, is breach that divide between heaven and earth, and this kingdom stands in sharp contrast to the one already there.

These verses really set up a contrast between opposing kingdoms and in the calling of the first disciples the message is clear, there's a choice to be made. The demands of Rome were clear – those who were conquered and occupied were given Roman protection but in return they owed their lives, their labour and their land. When Jesus calls the choice is between one allegiance or the other. No one can serve two masters Matthew will note in two chapters time, so will it be the empire of Rome or the kingdom of heaven? We can hear those words and see one as a political choice and the other spiritual, but Matthew doesn't make that distinction. For him and the other gospel authors everything is spiritual and everything is political.

In the 23 years since I answered that question in Waiapu I've kept my word. I've never told anyone which party to vote for or preached party politics from the pulpit. But I do preach politics. Jesus calls people to follow him and the choice he offers is inherently a political one. Walking the way of Jesus demands political choices. That may be controversial, it may be uncomfortable, but it's most definitely the point of the gospel.