

Sermon for the Third Sunday of Epiphany – The start of Jesus’ Ministry in Capernaum

Ps 27:1, 4-6, Mt 4:12-23 (quoting Isa 9.1-4)



Capernaum is a beautiful place. The site is very tranquil. It is right by the sea of Galilee. The Sea of Galilee has roughly the shape of a pear upside down, with a narrow bit in the south, and a wide round coast in the north. Capernaum is on the northern coast of the lake.

Today, when you arrive at Capernaum, you can walk right to the edge of the water. On a calm and sunny day, you get a stunning view of the hills all around the lake. The air is fresh in the early morning, the birds dive and catch fish, the breeze is gentle in the trees. Although the land is dry, the coastline is quite green. It’s really lovely. If you turn around and walk back into the village, you see the ruins of the synagogue, with their peaceful white columns and walls. The site is quiet and invites you to prayer and reflection. You wonder what it was like when Jesus walked along its shores.

Well it was not so different in its layout, but it was far from quiet. In fact, in the first century, Capernaum was a significant town of about 1,500 people, located on a very important trade route, the Via Maris that linked Damascus in Syria, with the Mediterranean. Being on the trade route meant that the fishing and farming industries thrived in the area. Peter the fisherman lived there, with all his family. And because Capernaum was under the jurisdiction of Herod Antipas, it had a number of administrative officials, such as Matthew the tax-collector. There, on the cobbled streets of the town, you would find hundreds of merchants with their animals, laden with goods, you would hear the cries of the street vendors, you would smell the meals being prepared, the bread being baked, the fish being roasted. It was an exciting and inviting place.

But it was also a dark place. Capernaum was in the land of Zebulun and Naphtali. Now it can be odd to hear Matthew speak of this part of the world in that way. It’s as if you were referring to Paris as being in the “territory of the Franks”. But there’s a reason for that. Zebulun and Naphtali were the sons of Jacob. And they gave their names to two of the tribes that ultimately settled in the beautiful northern region of the sea of Galilee. Unfortunately, those two tribes were among those who gave up their faith in God and turned to the false idols and the things of the world. Zebulun and Naphtali were the very first tribes of the northern kingdom of Israel to be deported by the Assyrians 700 years before Matthew wrote. For 700 years, people had ignored the covenant they had with God.



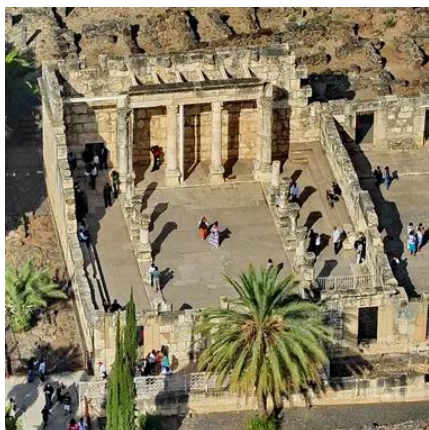
Many of the Old Testament prophets had railed against the sinfulness and the evil of the northern tribes of Galilee. One of those was Isaiah. Matthew quotes Isaiah (Isa 9:1-2) who prophesied: 'Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, in the former time brought into contempt, the people who sat in darkness and the shadow of death have seen a great light, light has dawned in Galilee!' Note the very stark words, darkness, and the shadow of death. These were dark times indeed. But the light of the world was coming to the land of Jacob's sons.

Jesus the Rabbi was coming to Capernaum in order to fulfil the prophecies of old, and bring about the kingdom of God. And so he started by teaching in synagogues and curing all the sick. And we read further on in the 9th chapter of Matthew's gospel that when Jesus started preaching and performing miracles in this part of Galilee, 'the crowds marvelled, saying "never was anything like this seen in Israel".' (Mt. 9:33)

In fact Jesus became so famous that his fame spread throughout all Syria. We're talking hundreds of kilometres north east of Capernaum. The people of Syria brought their sick to Jesus in Capernaum. So now imagine Capernaum again, but this time, on top of all the merchants, vendors and peddlers, add the long files of people bringing their sick to Jesus every day: demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, people with all sorts of pains, diseases and conditions. And Jesus cured them all.

And imagine, as he cures all these people, what he proclaims. He proclaims the good news of the kingdom. The good news of the kingdom of God. The end of blindness, the end of captivity, the end of oppression from sickness or poverty. 'Repent', he said, 'for the kingdom of heaven has come near.' In 'repentance', he was calling people to turn away from false idols and back to God. And in the collective memory, the kingdom was the kingdom of David, centred on God's covenant of peace proclaimed in Ezekiel (Ezekiel 34:23-25). Capernaum was the central place from where Jesus called all people to proclaim God as king. And even though they had turned away from God, the people of Capernaum and much further away could not ignore that something extremely powerful was at play in the presence of Jesus of Nazareth.

And so it is there, in that land of spiritual darkness, not unlike the countries of the world today, that Jesus chose to call his first disciples. He called first some local people, two sets of brothers, Simon-Peter and Andrew, and James and John. And together, from the small but bustling town of Capernaum, they travelled throughout Galilee and they changed the world.



It was in Capernaum, in the synagogue, after the miracle of the feeding of the thousands, that Peter decided that was it, the evidence was in. And when Jesus asked 'will you walk with me', Peter answered: 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. And we believe and are sure that you are that Christ, the Son of the living God' (John 6:68-69).

'To whom shall we go?' With these words, Peter the fisherman from Capernaum (soon to be an apostle of God) expressed a universal question.

Since those dramatic days on the cobbled streets of Capernaum, an innumerable host of people have chosen to go to Christ, our light and our salvation, as we read in Psalm 27. They have chosen to live in the house of the Lord, to find shelter in his love, under the cover of his tent. And from that place of light, they have gone out into the dark places of the world to act out the mission that Jesus himself set for all his followers, for us: to help the poor, to fight for justice, to support the sick, the captives, and the oppressed.

And so I hope that as this year begins, we will all remember the extraordinary beginnings of Jesus' ministry in Capernaum, on the road by the sea of Galilee, that we'll remember the wonder of the apostles, the amazement of all who knew his healing touch. When we find ourselves in a dark place and we need his presence, may we remember the words of Matthew and Isaiah: 'light has dawned'. For he is truly Christ, the Son of the living God, here with us, now.

Amen.