#### Matthew 4: 12 – 23 SA 22.01.17

When Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: “Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles – the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.” From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea – for they were fishermen. And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

Just a few minutes ago, I read the gospel reading for this morning. I wonder what you can remember from that reading. Now I am not going to be a cruel teacher who says, OK John what can you remember ? I hope I am not that kind of teacher. But I would like you to think about what you can remember and of course no cheating !!!

So what did you remember? What did you think of first?

Was it the bit about the fishermen?

Can anybody remember what happened to John the Baptist and what happened next?

Was there anything else of importance?

Yes, the prophecy of Isaiah. Now I suspect whilst several people noticed that was the Old Testament reading for this morning, I doubt if it started a chain of thought. Quite frankly I would be astonished, if any one had thought, “Wow, Jesus is the fulfilment of the prophecies of the Old Testament.”

In fact I suspect that very few Christians in the whole world would get very excited about these frequent references in the Gospel written by Matthew. None of the other gospel writers make the effort that he does, to show Jesus has fulfilled the prophecies of the OT. So why is there this difference? When we look in detail at the four gospels, it is clear that they were written for different groups within the early church. Matthew was clearly written for those Jews who were interested in the Christian faith or who had already chosen to become Christians. Therefor e as Professor Alistair Mc Grath of Oxford University writes “Perhaps the most noticeable feature of Matthew’s gospel is its concern to demonstrate the way in which Jesus Christ fulfils both the prophecies and the expectations of the Jewish people.” NIV Bible Handbook p297)

OK, that was almost 2000 years ago, but why bother about it today?

The first reason is that it gives us an insight into the mindset of the early Jewish disciples.

Many people in our society see these people as credulous fools or unscrupulous fraudsters. Just on Friday I received this card from a former colleague. He describes religious belief as irrational nonsense…. Fantasies dreamt up by madmen who’d spent too long in the sun of the north African Desert. “ (Brian Watson) Well, modern atheists tend to follow the lead of Richard Dawkins and become aggressive and dismissive towards Christians and utterly contemptuous of our ancestors. They tend to think that people who lived before the so called Enlightenment were primitive and stupid. They were easily impressed and susceptible to believe absolute nonsense. However, if we take the trouble to look at the evidence, we find that the opposite is true.

 Let us briefly look at just one strand of evidence. Let us take this piece of prophecy from Isaiah.

Prophets play a very important role in the development of the Jewish faith. Their major function was to call back the Jewish people from straying away from the faith in the one God Jahweh-know in old versions of the Bible as Jehovah. They are united in spelling out the consequences of obedience and disobedience to God. Obedience leads to life and disobedience leads to disaster, on both a personal and national level. Now prophets were to be found in the Jewish religion, but also in Egypt, Assyria and Babylon. And all these Ancient Near Eastern Civilisations knew that there was a high chance of charlatans. They therefore recorded on stone and clay tablets, in frescoes and on papyrus, what the prophets had said. Why? So that they could prove, if they were true.

 We know that some of the Jewish prophets such as Jeremiah had scribes and that others had prophecies that were recorded, therefore as it was such a widespread practice, we can expect it amongst the Jews.

 There prophets, especially Isaiah looked forward to a time, when God would come to rescue his people, by sending a Messiah. In the time of Jesus this expectation was high. Several people did turn up and claim to be the Messiah, but they were soon seen to be imposters. Therefore it was of vital importance for Matthew to show that

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined.

Just as Jesus himself taught, “I am the light of the world.”

The second reason why we should bother to read the OT is “that the New Testament never rejects the OT, nor sees it as less important than the New Testament. Paul sums up the view of the early church. “All scripture is God breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness’ (2 Timothy 3:16- and by all scripture he meant the whole of the OT. Both he and Peter (2Peter 1:20-21) believed that the OT had a huge and abiding value, because it is still God’s word. But something had changed. The one for whom the OT had prepared, had now come and this changed everything.” ( Mc Grath p303) But this did not sweep it away. Jesus himself said,

I did not come to abolish the law and the prophets, but to fulfil them. ( Matthew 5:17) By his fulfilment parts of the OT no longer remain in force, notably the ritual, the food laws and many of the festivals of the Jewish faith. The early church had quite a struggle to discern which laws and practices from Judaism should be integrated into the Christian faith. But the Old Testament remained of vital importance to them and is still for us, in that we see how God has unfolded his plan of salvation.

 For many Christians today, the Old Testament is a closed book. I have been very blessed in having been taught by two of the greatest teachers of the OT in the 2oth century-James Luther Mays and John Bright. Both were at Union Presbyterian Seminary , when I was there in the academic year 1974-5. Their enthusiasm and knowledge led me to see that the Ot Testament is not a primitive series of documents displaying a horrific picture of God. It is full of the deepest wisdom, heart moving poetry, solace and challenges that have hopefully impacted upon me. And as a preacher in this church for about 15 years, I note that of the 67 sermons I have preached here one fifth were on the Old Testament. The reason is quite simple, the OT is God’s word **still** to our world and our times.

As Sherlock Holmes might say to my former colleague, Look at the evidence, it’s elementary my dear Watson!