

## SERMON: Sunday – 22 January 2023 – Rev Alistair Cowper

### Why Galilee?

Psalm 27:1, 4-9  
Matthew 4:12-23

There are a few questions to ask of Jesus' ministry and calling of the first disciples.

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Why Galilee?

What is the message?

Who is it for?

Why Galilee?

Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee (12).

(or he went to Galilee. Withdrew sounds a bit like he was went their in fear of him too being arrested by Herod, which I'm sure wasn't the case). He wasn't frightened of Herod. He went to Galilee for an different reason).

I'm sure it was no accident that Jesus went to Galilee to proclaim the good news.

William Barclay in his commentary talks about this, about how it was significant in Jesus leaving Nazareth as a sign of closing the door that lay behind him and opening the door that lay in front of him, a clean cut between the old and the new.

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He wrote this, "Into life there come these moments of decision. It is always better to meet them with an even surgical cut than to vacillate undecided between two courses of action".

Grasp the moment. Start that new thing. Now. (Is that a word for someone in the first month if this new year)?

So Jesus made a clear decision to "go".

But why Galilee, the most northerly district of Palestine?

Well it was densely populated for a start. It was full of people. Due at least in part because it was the most fertile area of Palestine.

According to the Roman historian Josephus, there were over 200 villages each having more than 15,000 people in them.

So clearly that's where the people were. And that's where Jesus went.

Josephus writes that Galilee was most open to new ideas, saying they were ever fond of innovations, ever ready to follow a leader and to begin an insurrection.

The Galileans were also known for their courage and so this also contributed to them being fertile ground for the new gospel to take root.

Galilee was encircled by gentiles, non-Jews, hence it is often referred to as Galilee of the Gentiles. And it was probably this that made the people there open to new ideas.

That combined with the fact that all main roads passed through Galilee, from Damascus in Syria down to Egypt and the rest of Africa.

The population was therefore very multi ethnic and had been since the Assyrians invaded Israel in the 8 century BC and then there was the Hebrews return from exile two centuries later and then the Jewish revolts of Maccabeus and Aristobulus in the second century before Christ.

Rather than be a Jewish ghetto it was a cosmopolitan place open to new ideas, a great place for Jesus to begin to proclaim the reign of God.

As Willie Barclay wrote, "Galilee was the one place in all Palestine where a new teacher with a new message had any chance of being heard".

#### What is the message?

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." (17).

The message is 'come to your right mind, think differently, the reign of God is here'.

It was a teacher heralding in a new word of truth, a proclamation of a message directly from a king. That's literally what the Greek word for preach or proclaim means.

It was a word of certainty. Jesus had no doubt about this message.

It was a word of authority. Jesus was speaking on behalf of God, the direct Source of the message. It was the voice of God.

Willie Barclay paraphrases it as,

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“Repent. Turn from your own ways and turn to God. Lift your eyes from earth and look to heaven. Reverse your direction, and stop walking away from God and begin walking towards God”.

Who is it for?

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 (23).

And the first followers he calls to follow are simple, ordinary people; which is an important picture that underlines the truth that life in God’s kingdom is for all, irrespective of education or riches or anything else.

In short it’s for everyone. But of course not everyone is interested. How can we learn from Jesus and help to change that.

First of all, we learn to do as Jesus did and ‘go’. Go to our Galilee. Go to where people are.

A book I read recently is *Church Next* by Eddie Gibbs and Ian Coffey, an important book on mission in the 21st Century. One of the conclusions is that the church in our nation needs to “move from being an inviting church to becoming an infiltrating church”. They go on to say,

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“The church will need to be turned inside out in order to bring those outside in. It will not suffice simply to invite the seeker to come to us to hear the gospel on our own turf. Instead, the church will have to be the church in the world – gathering for worship in order to go out in mission. Its programmes must be geared to equip and support the people of God in the strategic locations where the Lord has already placed them to serve as his representatives.”

So we go and be church in the world. We look for our own Galilee and we live out our faith life there as ambassadors of Christ.

So we’ve answered our questions:

Why Galilee?

What is the message?

Who is it for?

Let me finish with a word about how do we do it.

How can we learn best to fish from this story of Jesus.

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Willie Barclay said that good fishermen need these 5 characteristics:

Patience, learning to wait on God's timing.

Perseverance, being prepared to not be discouraged but to try, try and try again.

Courage, taking risks to speak the truth and live it out.

An eye for the right moment, being wise (Spirit led) about choosing the right moment to speak or act. There is a time to speak and a time to refrain from speaking (Ecclesiastes 3:7).

Fit the bait to the fish. Paul put it as being all things to all men that he might win some. The same approach won't apply to every situation. And there will be some circles where I work well but others where others will do better.

Keep himself or herself out of sight. Seeking to present Christ. To fix people's eyes, not on himself, but on that figure beyond.

And I'd add another important characteristic. We do it on collaboration. We do it together, in partnership. Fisherman never went out in boats on their own. They needed help to haul in the nets.

We need a good support network in which to thrive. We need to support and encourage one another, prayerfully and practically. So let's commit ourselves to doing that. And see what happens.

The reign of God is near.

Amen.