



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

### **3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time - Year A**

#### ***Back Story***

*Readings: Isaiah 8:23-9:3, Ps 26, 1 Corinthians 1: 10-13, 17, Matthew 4: 12-23*

Everything has a back story. Every person has.

When we know the back story, the front story makes more sense.

Take for example the quotation from Isaiah today. So significant that we get it in the lection twice – once in the original prophecy and then duly quoted by St Matthew as the lead into the preaching ministry of Jesus. Naphthali & Zebulun. To most people these are just a couple of names, significance unknown, history blank, reason for inclusion uncertain. Well let's try to do a bit of clearing up, shine a bit of light on the obscurity.

The people of Naphthali and Zebulun get a reprise in Matthew's Gospel not least because Matthew takes every opportunity to highlight the direct Jewish back story to Christ. The credibility of Jesus on his home territory hinges on the authenticity of His roots – fulfilling Messianic prophecies as the heir of David and in direct line to the kingship. This prophecy is a further boost to the case. The Light of the world has come to enlighten the dark places. Jesus begins His ministry in the Galilee, the Galilee of the Gentiles and this too is significant for the future. The region under discussion, Naphthali and Zebulun are areas allocated to those tribes of Israel in their

settlement of the land. Of course it was not as clean or clear cut as might have been hoped. The Israel that eventually emerged was much smaller. The tribes, it is believed, before their insistent demand for a king ('so we can be like everybody else' - 'That's the point – you're not!') were organised roughly in a League with different territories. Sometimes called an 'AMPHICTYONY'. The coherence of the League was marginally less than that of the EU and individually and corporately it was given a regular 'whopping' by the very tribes that they were supposed to have replaced – not least the beastly Philistines.

The truth about the tribal allocation of Naphthali and Zebulun was that it never really took place. The region was half settled but retained large swathes of unreformed Canaanite paganism. It was this region that contained The Galilee, The Galilee of the Gentiles as Matthew puts it. The Galilee, or 'The Circle' as it translates, was the most northerly part of Israel, bounded by Syria, Phoenicia and the eponymous Sea. Fifty miles by twenty five, it was the most populous region, the most fertile, the most productive, the most racially mixed, the most innovative, the most given to new ideas and most politically charged and potentially seditious. We have all this from the great historian Josephus, sometime governor there. It was to this region that Jesus returned, after the state murder of John the Baptist, to take up the reins and begin his public ministry. It is no accident that Jesus makes Capernaum his HQ. The town name means the 'Village of Nahum' and the Prophet Nahum was the man who foretold the overthrow and defeat of the great and cruel war machine that was ancient Assyria. People of Jesus time looked to the Messiah to liberate them from the current war machine of Rome. So the return to the Galilee makes theological and political sense. It is a potentially strong base for the ministry and the overthrow of evil. Many of Jesus' miracles take place around there.

This is the back story of the region. If the Galilee responded then the rest of Israel would sit up and take note. But the Gospel passage does not stop there. It includes the call of the 'foundational four', Peter, Andrew, James and John. They are all Galileans, all fishermen, all working the same shoreline, all known to one another. The Gospel account reads like a spontaneous miracle of assent. Jesus wanders down the beach and calls the 'Fab Four' and they drop their nets, abandon poor old Zebedee and the hired crew and set off on the long and winding road that will lead to Jerusalem and the enthronement of the Messiah. (They were not to know that the throne would be a Cross and the lives would be lived out as martyrs in the far flung corners of the Gentile world). Sometimes, I think, we are intimidated by the apparent immediate and unquestioning response of these disciples. I couldn't do that, we shamefully admit. But I want to put it to you that it was not quite as simple as that for even the future leaders of the pilgrim band of the Universal Church, nor even for good old Matthew who dutifully records the shoreline miracle of vocation. What Matthew does not tell us, but we learn from John, is that the original encounter with Jesus is on the banks of the Jordan River, where John is baptising and points to the Lamb of God. Following that Andrew brings Peter and then Philip and Nathaniel, all home-town boys, join the conversation at Jesus' lodgings. No doubt on their return from the encounter they are full of the exciting news. Andrew has told Peter, 'We have found the Messiah' – a huge and dangerous conclusion. Nathaniel proclaims Jesus to be 'The Son of God and the King of Israel – in contemporary language blasphemy and sedition in one sentence. They return home, the excitement of the pilgrimage behind them but the whole Galilee shoreline now buzzing with expectation. Should they have stayed, followed, given up everything then and there? Have they missed the opportunity? The ground has been prepared, the pre-evangel is in place. The call, when it comes, is no less joyful for not being a complete

surprise. Everything falls into place. The journey has begun.

If we are to be good evangelists then, like John we point to the Lamb of God, we declare Jesus to be Son of God. We recall the defining encounter. We talk about Him on the shoreline places of our lives and pray that we will respond when He calls now and that others too will leave their nets and join the great adventure of the Gospel road. And remember, as we reach out to others – Listen! For only when we know the back story does the front story make sense.