

DRAWN INTO FAITH¹

**A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh in Saint James' Church,
King Street, Sydney, at the 0800 service on the Third Sunday after Epiphany,
22 January 2023**

I want to talk to you about faith. It used to be the case that most people believed to a certain extent and that belief was assumed to be the normal thing. In contemporary language, belief was the default mode. You believed unless you decided not to. Unbelief is now the default position. You don't believe unless you decide to. The results of the recent census tell us that this is so.

In the first section of this morning's gospel reading, Matthew has Jesus relocating to Capernaum, the location mentioned in the quotation from today's Isaiah reading. In that reading we come across the striking image of the light dawning on those who had lived in darkness. This passage was most probably written to hail the accession of either King Hezekiah in 725 BC or King Josiah in 640 BC. Verse 1 refers to Zebulun and Naphtali, parts of the kingdom of Judah, named after the Israelite tribes that originally lived there. These regions lay between the Sea of Galilee and the Mediterranean coast and were excised from the kingdom of Judah in 733 BC by the invading Assyrian king, Tilgath-Pileser. Thus, the persons who lived there came under foreign rule.

The Isaiah reading also refers to the day of Midian, that is, Gideon's victory over the Midianites as recorded in Judges 7. Thus, the coming of the new king was likewise heralded as a great victory and as the restoration of the alienated lands. Once living under the darkness of oppression and death, the inhabitants of these regions were now to live under a new light that had dawned upon them. They were liberated.

But why did Matthew refer to this text? For these are Matthew's words, not those of Jesus. Firstly, Jesus had made his new home in Capernaum on the shores of Galilee and within the general region of Zebulun and Naphtali. As in the time referred to by Isaiah, these territories were under foreign rule, this time that of Rome. Second, Matthew is positioning Jesus as the one who will deliver, as in the day of Midian. So, we can see that Matthew is making a political as well as a religious claim about Jesus, which is why he also refers to John the Baptist, whom he sees as a fellow subversive with Jesus.

For today's purposes, the most striking thing is the claim that the light has dawned. We are very familiar with the idea of 'seeing the light', which is also reminiscent of St Paul's encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus. Another name for seeing the light is the "a-ha" experience. We have all had it. Every so often something dawns on us. "A-ha", we say. Everything falls into place. It all makes sense.

Next, Jesus calls Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John to fish for people, that is, to disseminate the good news of the Kingdom of Heaven. I have never much liked the concept of fishing as an image of evangelism. Of course, you can see how it works in the context of today's gospel when Jesus calls some fisherman to work with him. But fish are usually caught by force or deception: by force with nets; by deception with bait, lures, and flies. Once caught, their almost inevitable destination is death and consumption by their captors. Altogether, the

¹ Readings: Isaiah 9:1-4; Psalm 27:1-10; 1 Corinthians 1:10-18; Matthew 4:12-25.

image of people forced or deceived into belief and destined for a form of death, whether of their spirituality or of their rationality, while they are consumed by the institution, confirms the worst aspects of the presentation of the Christian faith in public life today.

We may quite rightly reject a practice based literally on such an image, although it may be unwise to throw all of it away. What seems to be set out in this part of the gospel reading is that belief is drawn out, that one is captured or pursued by God. This contrasts with the modern concept that God is created by my belief; is found or not found by my activity. This ultimate hubris is rejected by Jesus who calls the disciples into believing in him.

Today's epistle reading from 1 Corinthians warns us about thinking that we derive our faith from those who have conveyed it to us. Certainly, they were the vehicle, but it was not theirs. Paul ends this section with the statement that the message of the cross is a form of foolishness. This is not a denial of the role of human reason but a warning against thinking that human reason can produce a result every time.

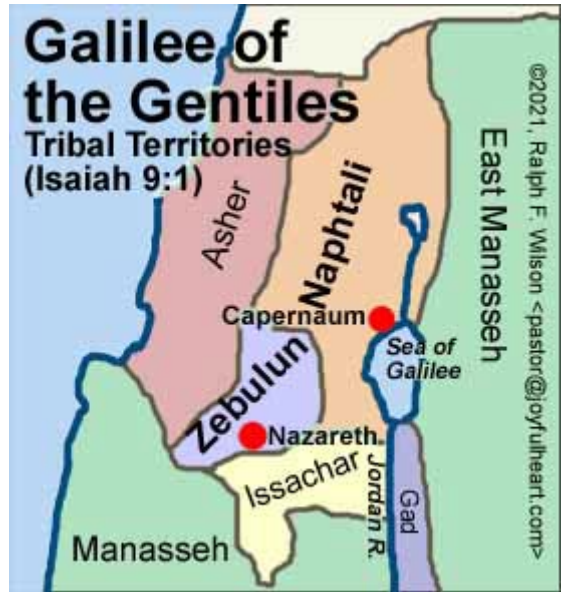
What does all this say about faith, about believing? Four images are presented in today's readings: the light dawning; being called; receiving a gift; and taking the leap into foolishness. None of these depend principally on my rational thought, although none of them denies it. What they do invite is a consideration of mystery. No one decides to be a follower of Jesus on their own initiative. Everyone is called.

When John Henry Newman, now a saint, was made a cardinal in 1879, he was required to have a coat of arms. The design he chose shows three hearts and he took as his motto the Latin words, *Cor ad cor loquitur*, "Heart speaks to heart".

This phrase sets out the essential nature of belief, the speaking of heart to heart. In one of his Anglican sermons, Newman comments that it is a mistake to imagine that we are called once only.

For in truth we are not called once only, but many times; all through our life Christ is calling us. He called us first in Baptism; but afterwards also; whether we obey His voice or not, He graciously calls us still. If we fall from our Baptism, He calls us to repent; if we are striving to fulfil our calling, He calls us on from grace to grace, and from holiness to holiness, while life is given us.²

² John Henry Newman, *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, Vol. 8, No. 2, <http://www.newmanreader.org/works/parochial/volume8/sermon2.html>



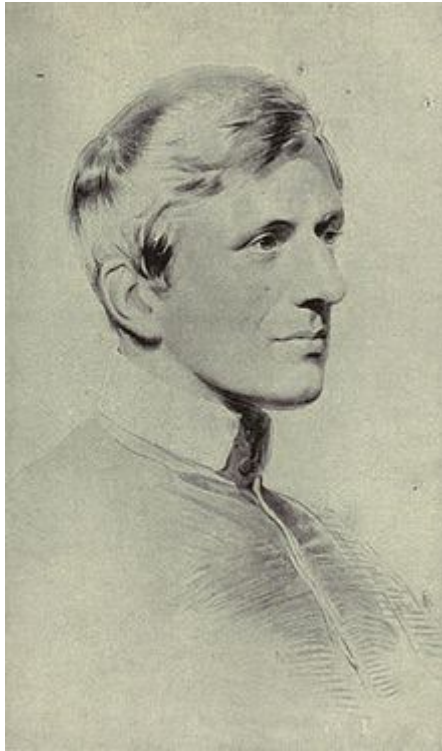
Territory of Zebulun and Naphthali



Call of Simon and Andrew
6th century Mosaic
Church of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna



Cardinal Newman's coat of arms



John Henry Newman in 1844, just before his move to the Roman Catholic Church
George Richmond



Newman as Cardinal, 1881
John Everett Millais