

MATTHEW 4:12-23  
LIGHT OVERCOMES!



What do you see in this picture? Called *Starry Night* and painted by Vincent Van Gogh! It is one of a number of paintings of starry skies that he painted. Some of us remember the song by Don McLean about Vincent that begins “*Starry, starry night...*” What do you see? We see the swirling clouds round the stars and the moon, and the eye is drawn to these stars first and foremost. We see the town beneath the hills, with houses lit at the windows. We see the church in the middle of the town. We see the dark, foreboding shape front

left: what is it? That is left to your imagination! The picture was painted when Van Gogh was in an asylum in France in 1889; some suggest that he painted this while suffering an attack of his mental illness, conveying something of his emotions by his art, despairing and tormented; it is a dramatic picture that has dark pieces, but in the darkness there is light, hope, power; it is not totally dark but there is light from the stars and the moon; the light may well have also expressed something of his Christian faith.

Is there darkness abroad in Scotland in 2017? What would you suggest brings that darkness to Scotland? That people don't know Jesus, with a lack of faith and a sense of God; greed and selfishness; hatred and violence, sectarianism; a sense of hopelessness, that this is the way things are and nothing will or can change; poverty, human trafficking; some don't care for the needs of the weak and the vulnerable, and that makes community life a bit harder, a bit darker. Someone has said that “The darker the night, the brighter the light shines.” (Michael Green) Where do we find light for 2017 in Scotland if all of this is darkness?

“Galilee of the Gentiles”. This comes from the old prophecy of Isaiah 9, the place where God promises to give light and it is the prophecy that goes on to talk about a child being born, a king – in Galilee of the Gentiles! This is the place where Jesus lived and grew up, the village of Nazareth was there; later Capernaum became Jesus' base on the Sea of Galilee and He spent a significant amount of His life in “Galilee of the Gentiles” rather than centre of the nation, Jerusalem; Jerusalem was a place to visit and later the place where all of this would come to a climax; Jerusalem was the place where Jesus died and was raised! Galilee was the most densely populated part of the Middle East at the time; there were a lot of people around. The population was a mixture of Gentiles and Jews and so was largely a place to be despised by the Jews. It was a place that was largely pagan and one of the oldest trade routes went through Galilee, the Way of the Sea from Damascus to Egypt, so people were used to all kinds of people passing through with all sorts of ideas. They were a tough and courageous people, always ready for something new.

This is where God set His Son to do His ministry. “It is not uncharacteristic of God to go for the least likely place... among the great masses of unreached humanity”. (Green) Matthew tells us that this ministry has three sides to it. There are these summary verses throughout the gospels, single verses that tell us so much about Jesus. “*Jesus went...*” (*Matthew 4:23*) First, He preached the good news, proclaiming the coming of God's kingdom in a new way, telling people that God is king and that they should take God to be their king and live in God's ways;

the beginning of that process is repentance, turning away from wrong ways, from mistakes, from shortcomings and looking to be the people that God wants; *“repent...” (Matthew 4:17)* Preaching the good news. Secondly, teaching in the synagogues suggests something of the traditional ‘rabbi’ in Jesus, that He was earning a reputation as a teacher and is given the chance to teach in the synagogues, teaching people about God from the Bible, helping them to understand what God is like, what God has said. Thirdly, there is His healing ministry, demonstrating the power of God to heal people in need, in whatever way that manifested itself. Preaching, teaching, healing and in doing all of that, light comes to break down the darkness.

We are then told the story of four men who responded to Jesus and embraced the light. Peter and Andrew, James and John, all fishermen; two sets of brothers, making a living from the sea and working out of Capernaum. They are successful small businessmen, from prosperous families, but men who needed to be tough to deal with the sea and its dangers, maybe also a bit rough and ready, but here we see them responding to Jesus. Last week, Fraser opened up for us John’s story of Andrew saying to his brother “come and see” when Jesus had told them “Go and tell”. Maybe all of that is the back-story to this encounter on the quayside, with fishing nets and boats and men fishing and others mending nets and along comes Jesus to say to these four men: *“Come follow...” (Matthew 4:19)* With great simplicity, Matthew tells us that *“At once...” (Matthew 4:20)* Brave and decisive, off they go on the life of discipleship, to listen, to watch, to learn, to find faith and find light from Jesus.

Light breaks the darkness when Jesus comes! Is that too simplistic for you? The darkness that taints the world is broken down when Jesus is Lord! That’s how simple the gospel is. If you are looking for complicated spiritual solutions to the darkness in the world, then you need to go somewhere else, because you will not find them in the Bible. Darkness is broken when light shines in the world and for the Bible light comes when Jesus comes. Nothing has changed. The darkness is as we listed before; what breaks the darkness of hatred and violence? Jesus speaks about love for our neighbour, even our enemies. What breaks the darkness of people lacking a sense of God? Jesus is God made flesh come to live in our world, and we are called to turn to Him and find life in all its fullness. What breaks the darkness of human trafficking? People are inspired to change their ways and live in the Lord’s ways and value other people instead of seeing them as a commodity. Light breaks the darkness when Jesus comes into a human life and brings hope and peace and love and overcomes hopelessness and despair. It is not easy, it is not automatic, but nonetheless, this is what Jesus does in the world and in people’s lives.

What Scotland needs is for us to embrace the whole notion of being disciples and for us to be disciples of Jesus purposefully. When Jesus says “follow me” we say “yes” to that and sign up as followers who are ready to listen to Jesus and learn from Him, to be inspired by God and discover what faith is all about. What Scotland needs is for us, when Jesus says “I am the light of the world”, that we embrace that light and walk in the Lord’s ways by being the kind of people Jesus really wants us to be. What happens when we do that is that light spills out from us; light spills over from our lives into the lives of other people we meet, our family, our friends, our neighbours, and it even happens unconsciously and perhaps best happens unconsciously. When we walk in the light, the darkness becomes a little less dark and the light has won another little victory along the way.

We can’t take this for granted. When I looked at these readings for today, I couldn’t see a connection between Matthew 4 and 1 Corinthians 1:10-18, but then it dawned on me. The Church in Corinth was infested with darkness. Paul writes to a group of Christians who are divided and who quarrel amongst themselves, who can’t agree on even the most basic aspects

of church life. Here is a church invaded by darkness and whose witness is severely compromised! This is not just Christians falling out with each other, but this creates a big dark hole in churches where it happens. It may be all sorts of things: Christians who gossip about one another or other people; Christians who tell lies, who cheat, whose business practices are questionable, who subscribe to views that are unjust, or sexist, or racist. There are all kinds of ways in which darkness can invade the life of a church and we must guard against that with all our energy. We need to call these attitudes by their real and proper name, that they are part of the dark world and need to be exposed by the light of Christ.

Darkness can also invade the soul of individual; “the dark night of the soul” has long been part of Christian thinking and experience, times we experience, places we find ourselves in that are dark, full of despair, places where hopelessness is the key word, and we wonder if we will ever emerge into the light again. Sometimes the darkness is too much for us and people walk away from faith and Church because this darkness invades their soul and feel as if God has gone away. But God knows and understands; Jesus has been there before us and is able to help us. The Light of the world came to overcome the darkness in the world and in us and is able to save us from these times in our lives.

“Galilee of the Gentiles”; “*The people...*” (*Matthew 4:16*) Whatever darkness stalks Scotland in 2017 Jesus is the light of the world. Whatever darkness stalks the church in Scotland in 2017, Jesus is the light of the world. Whatever darkness stalks our lives in 2017, Jesus is the light of the world. The challenge for us is to embrace the light and to follow Jesus, to listen to His Word, to walk in His ways. Not only is this a good thing for us to do for ourselves, but when we embrace the light and live by the light, it spills over into lives of others; it touches other people so that their lives are better too. Van Gogh may have been in the darkness of his own spirit, but he saw light, he saw hope and he painted hope. I’d like to think that even in his most troubled life, he found grace from God. God is still at work in our world; God is still at work in our lives. Jesus brings light. Embrace the light; live by it; walk in it and follow Jesus, purposefully, diligently, with resilience. Every time we do that, the light has overcome the darkness just a little bit more!

*Lord, I have to admit that sometimes, when the way is hard,  
I do get discouraged and I find it hard to trust.  
As the fishermen left their nets,  
trusted and followed,  
help me to do the same.  
Amen.*