My sermon today is in 4 parts. I know that normally Presbyterians have three part sermons, this one is four parts.

I’ve even got headings for each.

The dream.

The implementation.

The reality.

Where to now.

The dream.

The early church was keen to show that this new movement, called Christianity, called the way, called followers of that man Jesus, was respectable and that it had deep roots in the history of the Hebrew people, and in the writings and prophecies of the past.

This reading from Isaiah resonated with them. Something wonderful comes out of Galilee. You can see their thinking, Jesus was from Galilee, this prophecy must be about him.

We are more familiar with the next few verses as they are always read at Christmas time. But today we are focusing on these few verses.

What is the dream?

The reading sets up a sort of before and after idea, there was a time when people walked in darkness, and a part of the kingdom was held in contemp. But this was to change. Light is to dawn. What is more that those in oppression will be set free. There will be a time of rejoicing and plenty. Obviously, there is a physical context of the passage in history, but for the early church they really only saw one thing.

For the early church this was the story of Jesus, the hope of Jesus writ large. From darkness to light, from contempt to glory, from oppression to freedom.

What is there not to like in that dream.

In the Matthew reading we see this dream becoming a reality. My second section: the implementation.

Here in a reading immediately after the story of the temptations, we get Matthews version of the formal start of the ministry of Jesus.

Notice how Matthew makes the link with the dream from the past in the extensive quote. See how Matthew links this directly to Jesus preaching the good news.

And then the story pauses: Jesus stops, and he takes time out from his busy preaching to call Peter, Andrew, James and John.

And then he is back into it, preaching, healing, teaching. It is a tour de force. Here is the dream of light breaking into darkness, of contempt being turned into glory, of oppression giving way to freedom.

Notice how decisive Jesus is:

You, come, follow me. I will give you tasks, you will do this.

Look at what they do: they drop everything and follow.

That’s cool. That’s never happened to me.

You can see the sequence, of the prophecy, about light, Jesus immediately putting that dream into effect, and the outpouring of action and activity that saw people’s lives change and become better. See the link between the call and faith that is action, activity based. Jesus didn’t call the disciple to a sit down and a cuppa.

However, these is no fly in the soup of this story. No dissention in the ranks, no disciple backing out, no healing that has gone wrong.

That comes latter.

That comes in the Corinthians reading.

And in the Corinthians reading you get it in spades.

There is lots we could say about aspects of this reading.

One is, how surprised are we to learn that a church is in conflict?

It has all the hall marks of a typical church conflict: the whistle blower for instance, brining rumours of a fight to the minister, the description of the fight itself, which reads like a set of meeting minutes, and how in the grand scheme of things the issue is pretty trivial.

What also is disturbing, is that this reported conflict, takes place only a few short years after the events recorded in Matthew take place. How quickly the dream is shattered by the reality of human frailty and messiness.

The beautiful institution, the great movement started by our Lord, has clay feet.

It must have been disheartening to Paul to have this happen in a church he helped found, so soon after its founding. Indeed, it’s disheartening whenever this sort of conflict happens in the church.

But conflict is inevitable, people’s egos, ambitions, jealousies, hatreds, all contribute to create conflict in the church, and in other institutions outside the church. Some people even believe that a certain level of conflict enables creativity and provides stimulus to groups to get them moving. Conflict may not be all that bad. All of us benefit from having people challenge us and contradict us.

For example, if this conflict in Corinth, had been pushed under the carpet, or hidden away, we would never have had the benefit of Paul’s letter in response. Christianity would be the poorer. So a large chunk of this letter is about the conflicts in Corinth, and Paul’s responses have generated the theologies and practices that undergird the church even to today.

For example:

I get a bit nervous about baptism, about how the baptism has to be on a certain date, so the great Aunt Lilly can attend, or that it must be done before the baby gets too big for the gown great granny McPhee had crocheted on the boat out from Scotland, or that it must be done with water from the Jordan that cousin Brian collected on his trip to the holy lands thirty years ago, or that it should be done at sun set on a beach and so on, as though all these things are important, when actually they are not.

These are the modern-day equivalents of being baptised by Apollos, or Cephas, or Paul.

They are what you might call the icing on the cake, nice to have, but not the cake, the cake is the key. The cake is the proclamation of the Gospel, the message of grace of goodness, which is the core message of baptism, that in baptism we are claimed and loved by God, claimed and loved by God.

Nothing else matters.

A message that Paul states is foolish to people everywhere, but like gold to those who grasp it and understand.

Well I may have drifted somewhat from my theme, so my forth point.

Maybe what these readings represent is the evolution of any institution, the dream that stated it, the implementation in all its glorious newness, and the inevitable conflict and messiness that comes with that.

What do we take out of this? For me it is the call of Paul, to reflect and concentrate on what is core, what is central, that proclamation of the gospel of Grace, that lifting up of the message of the cross, that gift of love and goodness that is evident in Christs life, so that instead of concentrating all the time on the icing of the cake we have the cake, the love and grace of Christ in our lives which takes us back out into the world, to be lights in the darkness. So that the cycle of dreaming and doing can begin again.

Amen.