

Matthew 4:12 – 23

¹² When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he withdrew to Galilee. ¹³ Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali – ¹⁴ to fulfil what was said through the prophet Isaiah:

¹⁵ ‘Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles –¹⁶ the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.’

¹⁷ From that time on Jesus began to preach, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’

¹⁸ As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. ¹⁹ ‘Come, follow me,’ Jesus said, ‘and I will send you out to fish for people.’ ²⁰ At once they left their nets and followed him.

²¹ Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, ²² and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

²³ Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and illness among the people.

Introduction

If I asked you: “What are the biggest problems you are facing in life at the moment?” I wonder what you would say. Some may say Donald Trump! Struggles at work, trying to make ends meet, health problems, getting older, struggles in your family or struggles in your marriage. Perhaps more existential problems:

What I am doing with my life? Does it have any meaning or direction?

If you were to ask that question in Galilee just before Jesus appeared on the scene. Many would say it’s the Roman occupation. Possibly more would say something to do with illness, disease, or a loved one dying or grief. Matthew and Jesus would have said the biggest problem is you are, as Isaiah put it hundreds of years earlier, living under the shadow of death.

Matthew introduces whole of ministry of Jesus by saying how He fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: *the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.*”

That description would certainly have rung bells with the people of Galilee. If people stepped out of line they got thrown in a dark dungeon like John the Baptist or even put to death. And then there was the constant threat of deadly - or at least disabling - disease, not to mention the frequent danger of childbirth.

We might think well fortunately we are spared all that. We are not oppressed by a cruel foreign occupying power and thanks to anti-biotics and the NHS our life expectancy is way beyond the wildest dreams of people 2000 years ago. However, whether we recognise it or not we still all live in the shadow of death. The one greatest certainty of life is that sooner or later, we are all going to die (*life is a sexually transmitted terminal disease; Alan Coverdale*). And of course Isaiah was not just talking about physical death, but the far more serious issue of **spiritual** death which casts its shadow over the whole earth. In fact all the problems I mentioned at the outset, the problems we face, are but symptoms of this spiritual death, from which we all need rescuing.

So when Jesus comes to proclaim to them *the kingdom of God*, it really was good news. On Friday we saw the historic transfer of power from the Obama administration to the Trump administration. We might well say it is debatable as to whether this is *good news!* But in a similar way, Jesus came to announce a new administration: ***the Kingdom of God*** - that God's saving, healing life-giving reign has arrived. Donald Trump's pledge has been *to make America great again* and it remains to be seen whether he can live up to that promise.

God's kingdom, however, is where Jesus promises to make the whole *world* great again, where justice is restored, oppression destroyed.

It's what we see in the Garden of Eden and again in Rev 21 - creation as it was meant to be: no disease or dying or tears or sorrow. Where men and women live in perfect harmony with creation, with each other and with God, in the light of his presence. Where every human being is the perfect image of God, the person they were created to be. It is a world made perfect because God's reign touches every area of life because everyone is committed and enabled to live in His will

And Jesus says *the kingdom of heaven* has come here, not to Jerusalem or Rome but here. And it has come now – not in some glorious golden age in the past, nor in some remote time in the future long after they had died – but now. The reason *the kingdom of heaven is here is because* Jesus is here. He is the King, so wherever Jesus is, the kingdom of heaven is present.

This wonderful, glorious, good news is of course not just for the people of Galilee 2000 years ago. I believe that God planned that Jesus chose to begin his ministry in despised *Galilee of the gentiles* rather than in Jerusalem to show that God's kingdom had come for *everyone* – not just the religious or the respectable, or the orthodox or the rich and powerful, but ordinary people, the people who feel they are failures, on the outside, not good enough.. These are the people for whom Jesus felt great compassion *for they were like sheep without a shepherd*. This is the good news: *the people living in darkness have seen a great light;*

People are still oppressed by ungodly powers today:
anger, bitterness, greed, lust, hatred, pride, selfishness

People are blind with ignorance, or prejudice or unbelief.

People are held captive by addiction and imprisoned by fear, especially for many the fear of death or judgement.

Jesus came to dispel such darkness by opening people's eyes to the love and forgiveness of God.

However the coming of God's kingdom, this light coming into the darkness does not seem like *good news* to everybody: *if you are asleep in your nice dark bedroom and someone comes in and puts the main light on, it's a terrible shock – we squint and we squirm and we try to pull the bed-clothes over our heads. We have got too used to the darkness and we can't stand the light.*

That is true of our lives without God. We very easily get used to the spiritual darkness that is around us the culture where self comes first, where greed and dishonesty and money and sexual gratification come first rather than God. We become accustomed to it, we feel comfortable in that world. This is why Jesus says the coming of his kingdom demands a response, why his very first word is *repent* - = *turn around; complete change of attitude of mind and heart, a change of priorities. Not me and what I want first, but the King and what he wants first.*

We see this with Peter & Andrew and James & John. None were particularly bad people but they still needed to repent. Peter & Andrew had their own fishing business, that had been their first priority but now they are called to follow Jesus instead. Ditto James & John, committed to working for their father Zebedee's in the family fishing business, but now they left all of that behind to follow Jesus. So Jesus does not come just to proclaim the good news but when he **comes, he calls us...**as he says to Peter and Andrew and then James and John ***Come, follow me,***

This is what is involved when we repent – it is not just about confessing our sins, or feeling sorry about the past, it is following Jesus – it is saying I will go where you want me to go, not where I want to go or stay.

It involves a complete change of heart – or our way of thinking.

When Jesus comes, he promises to transform us.

He says to those four rough fishermen *I will make you fishers of men* - for this was their destiny. Jesus had been involved in their creation – he knew their potential, what they could be, what they were meant to be. Who would have guessed that these ordinary fisherman from a backwater in a remote and despised province of the Roman empire would become the great apostles and evangelists whose lives and words are remembered and celebrated across the world 2000 years later ?

Jesus says to every person he calls and that includes you and me:

I will not only rescue from the shadow of death, I will make you into the person I created you to be and I will involve you in bringing about my kingdom

When Jesus comes, he makes us whole.

He comes to make us whole in body, mind and spirit. We see him healing every kind of disease, delivering those who were captive to evil spirits, teaching in the synagogues, to make right people's false perceptions about God and his purposes for them and for those around them.

These are all signs of the Kingdom – that when we open up our lives to God, we are made whole.

There are so many around us who, like the people of Galilee, are walking in darkness, withering away on the inside.

They don't know that the Kingdom of God is all around them, that the King – Jesus - is right there next to them and that he loves them and is calling them and longs to transform them and make them into the person that they were created to be, to the make them whole.

That's where you and I come in.

For if you are a Christian, then Jesus has called you to follow him

- and like Jesus, you are called to open your eyes to the presence of God's kingdom right here and now,
- like Jesus you are called to walk in the constant awareness of your heavenly Father's love – his love for you and his love for every single person that you meet
- Like Jesus you are called to embody the kingdom of heaven in your very being
- Like Jesus you are called to the prompting of the Holy Spirit and bring the good news of God's kingdom into the lives of the people that you meet.

How can you and I possibly do that ?

- Only by giving time to ponder God's word and listen to the voice of Jesus
- by allowing the light of his presence to shine into our souls and reveal those attitudes that need to be changed and healed
- by opening up ourselves to his Spirit so that we might be made whole and made more like him..
- by responding daily to his call to follow wherever he leads us.

Sounds too hard ?

Jesus has come. He has come to us. He has come to you.

To each one of us He says: *Come and follow me and I will **make** you...*

*I will **make** you fishers of men...*

*I will **make** you the person I created you to be.*