

'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'

Hurry up and change your thinking - something's happening - you'd better change direction - the kingdom of heaven has come near.

We tend to think of a kingdom as being a *place* ruled over by a king - like an empire. But scholars like Tom Wright point out that the *Greek* word used by the gospel writers is better translated as 'kingship': it's more the power of a king's influence rather than a physical territory or domain that is ruled over.

So to be part of the kingdom of *God* is not to be in a particular place, either in this life or the next - it's not somewhere we go to when we die - but it *is* to be living our lives, wherever we are - now - under the loving, gentle, just, rule of *God* and to be creating an environment where values like truth, love, compassion, justice, freedom, community and peace prevail.

This is what Jesus is proclaiming - & to be part of it needs us to repent - to turn back to God and live under his loving power in a way that we were always intended to live...and, Jesus is saying, I have come to make that possible. (because...? We can't do this on our own!)

It's interesting that the Gospels seem to agree that Jesus didn't begin to announce the Kingdom until he heard that John the Baptist had been arrested. Perhaps there was something about that sinister moment that told him that the time had come. He had fought with the powers of darkness - the powers of empire - in the wilderness and had overcome them...and now one of its earthly representatives (Herod) had closed in on the one who had faithfully prepared the ground for the Kingdom message. Jesus couldn't wait any longer. The darkness had encroached; it was time for the light to shine.

Matthew, uses the words of Isaiah's prophecy to say to his Jewish readers (who would've known their scriptures) that now - at last - the story is reaching its complete fulfilment: 'God's zeal will shine the true light for the nations - the kingdom of God is being established.

So, as we saw last week, the very first thing Jesus did was to gather together a group of companions, the beginning of a community. We tend to call this community 'the church', Tom Wright calls it 'the Kingdom people' (I like that!).

This small group quickly grew from the twelve, into a great multitude. But it is still the same family comprised of a people who have seen the light shining in the darkness and who have chosen to follow the path it illuminates.

When he was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, what is it about Jesus that the fishermen saw do you

think? In today's language, they'd have been small businessmen, working as a family concern not for huge profits but to make enough to live on and have a little over. So, why did they give it all up to follow a young itinerant preacher?

- Unlike the shepherds in the fields outside Bethlehem *they* hadn't been visited by angels telling them who Jesus is.
- Unlike the mysterious travellers from the East *they* weren't taught a lesson about true kingship.
- As far as Matthew knows, they were not present when the heavens opened and God proclaimed his love for his Son at Jesus' baptism. They didn't know what he'd been through in the wilderness, as he was being tempted.

We the readers have seen it, of course - it's all there in Matthew's first four chapters. But Peter,

Andrew, James and John come to it new...and yet for the first time - and still they leave all that is familiar to them to follow Jesus.

And we can probably ask the same question of many people today. Why do people turn their backs on a lifetime of high earnings for the insecurity and let's face it, less than lucrative option, of being a pastor or the vicar of a church? Why do people become missionaries or join religious orders?

And these more obvious callings are only the tip of the iceberg of Christian vocation - Christians in millions of other walks of life regularly give up lifestyles and practices that look attractive and lucrative in order to maintain honesty, integrity, faith, hope and love?

Well the answer can only be Jesus himself. His call to 'Repent for the kingdom of heaven - of God - is near isn't a call to wipe out the past - which isn't

possible, (for us anyway) - but rather to change direction from now on and into the future; to have a radical change in one's thinking; to perceive & indeed live life in a completely new way.

It's only by doing this his way that we begin to become kingdom people; that we begin to come under the influence of God's rule in our lives; that we begin to see things and people the way God sees them; and find that our behaviour *can* change accordingly.

Sometimes Jesus' call comes slowly, like a faint murmur that grows in intensity until we can no longer ignore it. Sometimes he calls people as suddenly and dramatically as he called Peter and Andrew, James and John.

But by whatever means and at whatever pace, Jesus has a way of getting through if we let him, and whatever we are engaged with - whatever nets we're mending, or fish we're catching - somehow we will

become sufficiently aware of his presence and call. We won't necessarily know exactly what it is we're being asked to do or where it's all going to lead, even if we think we do ... for as we know - there is the God of surprises.

I love this prayer from Thomas Merton, the American Trappist monk which comes into my Celtic Daily readings every month:

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I have that desire in all that I am doing. And I know that if I do this, you will lead me by the right road although I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust you always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow

of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me and will never leave me to face my perils alone.

Matthew tells us how word suddenly went out that people whose lives had been blighted by every kind of illness and disease could be healed if they came to this extraordinary man.

But for Jesus the healings weren't simply about freeing people from their diseases, along with making way too much wine at a wedding, they were signs that the *new thing* that God was doing through him was breaking in. God's kingdom - God's sovereign, saving, liberating rule - was at last being unleashed upon Israel and the world, through his Son. How could this not bring healing, rejoicing, joy in its wake?

Soon the fishermen, who were used to quietly going about their business, found themselves at the centre of bustling crowds. Jesus' mission was well and truly launched, and they were caught up in it.

What pulls in the crowds today? Football (perhaps not) although the occasional Swans win is a good start. Rugby (certainly with the 6 Nations coming up soon). Trump's impeachment hearing is certainly drawing a crowd (just 3 years after his inauguration).

What would it take - what could and should Jesus' followers be about today - that would get everybody onto social media, sending tweets or whatever, that something new and exciting was happening and that everyone should come quickly - come and see?

We're not unlike the people in Jesus' day. What's in it for us - for me? If you heal me, deal with my immediate problems; if you do what I want I'll follow you. Because even when we do recognise Jesus, just as the Corinthian Christians had tended to do, we can so often be self-centred - or we can lose sight of him by our need to be in control; to be right, to be dominant, to

have our needs met. And while we fight about who's in the right or wrong, relying on our own resources, effectively we're turning our backs on the crucified God.

This call of Jesus isn't to a few special people. Jesus calls each and every one of us. He calls us first of all to repent - to turn around and follow him. And then just as he did with the apostles he tells us to "go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation."

In the words of Jane Williams *'Today's call is asking us not just to fit Jesus into our chosen way of living but to fit ourselves into his vision of life. In doing so, we are not making a sacrifice; we are on to a sure winner where we can only gain...'*

There's a strong tradition from the early church fathers and mothers: the abbas and ammas who turned their backs on the power and influence that the world

of 'empire' promised - and who sought the solitude in the Judaeen, Egyptian and Syrian deserts in the early 3rd century. Physically removing themselves from the temptation of being influential, they learned to be sparing and intentional with their words and to preach (get this) more through their lifestyle than through sermons. There were few "doctrines" to prove at this time in early Christianity - only an inner life to be experienced *so that* the outer life might be changed. We have a lot to learn from them still. Abba Isidore of Pelusia said this, "To live without speaking is better than to speak without living. For the former who lives rightly does good even by his silence but the latter does no good even when he speaks. When words and life correspond to one another they (form a whole) - actually he says 'this is the whole philosophy.

When Jesus called the disciples this was an invitation to total commitment. Nothing's changed - oh

but the fruit coming from lives lived in/filled with the

Spirit:

Love

Joy

Peace

Patience

Kindness

Goodness

Faithfulness

Gentleness

Self-control