

true vocation on offer

a sermon preached on the

third sunday after epiphany

22 January 2017

at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: Isaiah 9:1-4, Psalm 27:1-10, 1 Corinthians 1:10-18, Matthew 4:12-25

Jesus has mysteriously and inexplicably appeared at the river Jordan around the age of thirty, and surprisingly submitted to the baptism of John.¹ He has been 'immediately' led into the desert by the Spirit to be tested.² And now he has returned to Galilee, making his home in the cosmopolitan 'Galilee of the Gentiles' city of Capernaum.³ And he has a message, a 'proclamation':⁴ "Repent, for the kingdom of the heavens has come near."⁵ Haven't we heard that message before in this gospel?

Yes indeed we have! His hairy locust-eating baptising cousin John said exactly the same thing: "Repent, for the kingdom of the heavens has come near!"⁶

So Matthew the evangelist puts these identical words on the lips of both John and Jesus. And yet it is very clear that John and Jesus had some very different ideas about what these words mean: about what constituted 'repentance'; what the 'kingdom of the heavens' might be; and what its 'nearness' might mean.

Much scholarly ink has been spilled on this subject. To summarise; Jesus' proclamation broadly contradicts the moralising and punitive tone of John. Jesus does not come to bash up his enemies nor establish a powerful empire, contrary to John's expectations. Instead, in Christ we see with alarming clarity the unexpected and baffling self-emptying of God, echoed in these familiar terms by St Paul: "For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."⁷

Let's be honest, this 'foolishness' is a very strange proclamation; as un-marketable then, as now. If you read the gospel set for yesterday you will have been struck by its tone: "For people were saying [of Jesus], 'He has gone out of his mind'."⁸

And yet the fishermen Simon and Andrew, and James and John, 'immediately' left their livelihoods.⁹ They must have been touched very deeply by Jesus, by this promised kingdom of the heavens he claimed to be so close.

Let's pause and remember that the point of the gospel is not historical or archaeological tourism; but to see in the story our own lives and decisions. The gospel story is a kind of emblematic story – an archetypal¹⁰ story – in which we see are to see the story of ourselves. Let us consider how this happens, in practice.

Jesus appears in our lives just as suddenly – unexpectedly and mysteriously. We are minding our business; whatever our 'business' might be. We have plenty to do. We have our own ideas and plans for our lives and occupations. But this Jesus suddenly appears – in a myriad of guises, as many as we are – and interrupts our 'peace' with strange and perplexing words: 'Repent, for the kingdom of the heavens is near'.

Jesus' appearance is quite literally an epiphany¹¹; a manifestation, an en-lightenment, a making visible that which was previously not seen. Hence this gospel is given to us in these Epiphanytime Sundays.

¹ Matthew 3:15

² Matthew 4:1

³ Matthew 4:13

⁴ κηρυσσειν *kerussein*

⁵ Matthew 4:17

⁶ Matthew 3:2 The words of the Greek text are identical to 4:17

⁷ 1 Corinthians 1:18

⁸ Mark 3:21

⁹ Matthew 4:20,22

¹⁰ Greek: αρχη *archē*, the beginning, the Eternal, the First Cause + τυπος *typos*, impression, stamp, figure, image, example, pattern, type

¹¹ Greek: Επιφαναιω *epiphanaïō*, to show forth, to show, to appear, to make visible

I invite us to take a moment, to reflect on our own lives and experiences... By what form, in what particular manner, has Jesus appeared suddenly to us, with his strange and disturbing and enlightening message? Did we notice him? Or were we too busy? Were our plans and strategies too important to us to allow ourselves to notice his presence or hear his voice? Do we actually notice him; or do we just maintain a kind of generic moral-ethical-philosophical melange religion handed down to us from Sunday School, or from parents, or from years of church-going?

Let's consider Jesus' message according to what he *didn't* say: *no* promise of a God to bend the universe to suit our needs; *no* promise of a God to make a fantastically successful nation state or national economy; *no* threat that if we don't keep ourselves morally pure we'll burn for ever; *no* winnowing fork in his hand,¹² *no* wielding axe,¹³ contrary to his Baptising cousin's colourful predictions.

So let's turn then to what he *did* in fact say. As Muriel reminded us last week, though the church has tended to define 'repentance' according to a neurotic fixation on personal moral sinfulness, this is in fact a dark and deadly distortion. This actually constitutes a turning away from the εὐαγγέλιον, the *evangellion*. The 'metanoia' of Jesus is a complete change of direction of life, literally a turning around,¹⁴ to a holistic, comprehensive degree. Jesus invites us to change the *direction* of our lives. But in the direction of what?

In the direction of what he calls 'the kingdom of the heavens'. Mark's gospel talks of the 'kingdom of God'.¹⁵ The biblical scholar Brendan Byrne makes the case for adopting the term 'the rule of God', "since the reference is not to an institution but rather to a state of affairs".¹⁶ The state of affairs to which 'rule of God' refers is liberation from what the bible typically refers to as demonic forces.¹⁷

Now that term 'demonic forces' needs extra careful handling and brain-engaging for us. Think of the many ways in which we are bound up, entangled and trapped, 'walking in darkness'.¹⁸ Perhaps by outer circumstances which may be corrupt and unjust economic-political systems. Perhaps by our own inner state, by the neuroses and complexes that bedevil and confound us.

The 'kingdom of the heavens', in this light, amounts to the state of liberation from all that binds us: from outer entrapments such as possessions and things; from inner demons such as those inner energies and attitudes we may have refused to confront.

So when Jesus talks about 'repenting', he has in mind a movement in the direction of liberation, a state of Divinely-breathed freedom from all that binds us up, from all that prevents us from becoming fully alive – especially those energies and attitudes and neuroses which prevent us from fully living.¹⁹

Turning to the last part of his message; this liberated state he proclaims is 'at hand', 'has come near'. That means it's close, really close; so close that it's nearer even than our own breath!²⁰ The 'rule of God' – Jesus proclaims – is nearer than our breath. It's that close! In other words, it's gift; just as life is gift. All that's required is receiving. And what does that look like? As today's gospel makes clear, it may be willingness to 'immediately leave our nets and follow him', to leave our occupations.

In this epiphany light we can see very clearly just how differently these two men understood this deceptively simple message, and how much more revolutionary and transformative is the message of Jesus. Turn around, for the liberation from all that binds you, is so near to you that's it's closer even than your breath!

At the Table of transformation we are invited to assimilate this gift, to experience liberation, even from our own demons. All we have to do is receive its gift; to turn around, to leave our occupations in order to receive our true vocation.

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¹² Matthew 3:12

¹³ Matthew 3:10

¹⁴ Greek: μετανοεθ *metanoeo*; from the Hebrew *Shuv*

¹⁵ Mark 1:15

¹⁶ Brendan Byrne, *Lifting the Burden: Reading Matthew's Gospel in the Church Today*, Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2004, p35.

¹⁷ e.g., Matthew 4:24, 8:28-34, 9:32-34, 10:1, Mark 3:11

¹⁸ Isaiah 9:2, Matthew 4:16

¹⁹ e.g. Matthew 5:21-22, 27-28, 33-34, 38-39, 43-44

²⁰ cf. Deuteronomy 30:14