

Isaiah 9:1-4, Matthew 4:12-23 & 1 Corinthians 1:10-18

January 2020

Introduction:

A joyful mystery of the Christian faith is that God allows himself to be known. “Seek and you shall find, knock and the door will be opened” is a promise to those who seek God and to know him personally.¹ This is not common among world religions. The season of Epiphany remembers and celebrates this. God has allowed himself to be seen, heard and known by coming among humanity and human history in the person and life of Jesus Christ. Christ is for all.

In Advent leading up to Christmas we were expectant for this. Today our first reading expresses some of this expectation when Isaiah prophecies where on God’s earth heaven’s light would shine and with it God’s liberation from oppression.

After this reading of expectation from Isaiah the Gospel for today will follow because Matthew wants people to know that God’s liberating light came and was seen exactly where Isaiah had prophesied. An Epiphany of God came in Jesus and his ministry. We may be encouraged that God’s actions in time and space match the details given to the prophets 500 years earlier. Salvation history is real history.

Isaiah 9.1-4 (ESV)

9 But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

² The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness,
on them has light shone.

³ You have multiplied the nation;
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as they are glad when they divide the spoil.

⁴ For the yoke of his burden,
and the staff for his shoulder,
the rod of his oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.

Matthew 4.12-23 (ESV)

Jesus Begins His Ministry

¹² Now when he heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee. ¹³ And leaving Nazareth he went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, ¹⁴ so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

¹⁵ “The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali,
the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—

¹⁶ the people dwelling in darkness
have seen a great light,
and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death,
on them a light has dawned.”

¹⁷ From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

Jesus Calls the First Disciples

¹⁸ While walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. ¹⁹ And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” ²⁰ Immediately they left their nets and followed him. ²¹ And going on from there he saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets, and he called them. ²² Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

Jesus Ministers to Great Crowds

²³ And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people.

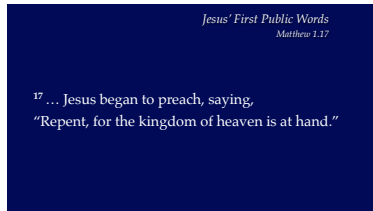
¹ Luke 11.9



Message

Exposition

With the setting of God's self-revelation or 'Epiphany' confirmed, Matthew begins his account of what Jesus said and did in the Christ event. We read in verse 17 that at Capernaum on the lake:



¹⁷ ... Jesus began to preach, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

These are the first reported public words of Jesus.

Any consideration of Jesus needs to come to terms with this primary message.

Jesus can assume that those hearing him say this share the desire to be and live as God desires his people to be and live. That is the essence of the 'Reign of Heaven' here in Matthew or 'Kingdom of God' as expressed elsewhere. For those who felt this longing of the human heart for God's regime, Jesus was saying it was close at hand and worth all the effort and cost of the fundamental changes of mind and heart required. The door was open but it would require letting go of being adjusted to the present regime of life as we know it to embrace the new regime of God's reign in the present age.

What we do need to register here is what was probably not obvious to those first hearing it but would become so. That is that Jesus himself re-presented and carried the kingdom of heaven, God's dynamic reign- in him self. He was it! He was what he was proclaiming. God's Reign was at hand - in him. Heaven was on earth in him. He was the message!

Understood this way this one phrase makes comparing Jesus with any other religious figures a waste of time. Missing this significance cripples what follows in the next 27 chapters.

In the wake of this one message Jesus begins to call people as his disciples. He has proclaimed the divine program of his mission and now chooses people to be personally trained for life within this. Discipleship is teaching within relationship. It's more like apprenticeship to a trade than higher education as we know it. You don't learn Christian living in formal education!

So with the declaration of God's Kingdom resonating around them, Jesus reaches out to two sets of brothers working the main industry of lake Galilee: fishing.

"Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people."

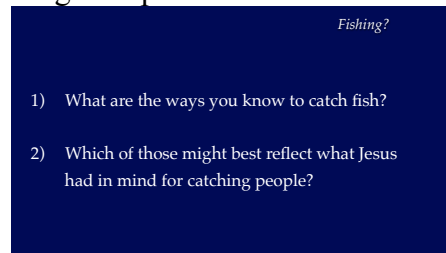
Jesus was talking both their professional language and the language of Jewish hope for a day when God's people would manifestly live as God's people and know God's reign on earth in every dimension. The fishermen responded immediately. They left their nets, their boats and -in the case of James and John- their father too, to follow Jesus.

From here Jesus took his new disciples on a peaching tour,

... proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people.

I want to engage this first by asking a few questions about the fishing metaphor:

- 1) What are the ways you know to catch fish?
- 2) Which of those might best reflect what Jesus had in mind for catching people? *Think of Method matching means, mode, manner etc*



Conclusion:

Fishing Galilee-style involved hand-made nets, boats, labour, skill and deep water. It was a risky enterprise. Fishing is a metaphor for gathering people into the reign of God who otherwise would not get there. How would Jesus gather?

This is the message and purpose of Jesus as given to pious Jewish fishermen:
Be gathered unto God as my disciples and you will gather others – just as you gather fish.

Now remembering what Jesus proclaimed and what he called people to in following him, let's hear something written just 30 to 35 years later.² This is St Paul writing to a new Gentile church in Pagan Corinth.

3rd Reading

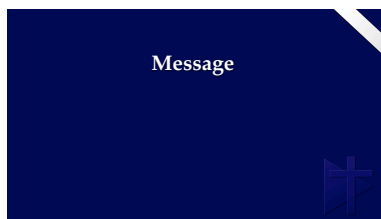
1 Corinthians 1.10-18 (ESV)

Divisions in the Church

¹⁰I appeal to you, brothers *and sisters*, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. ¹¹For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers *and sisters*. ¹²What I mean is that each one of you says, "I follow Paul," or "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas," or "I follow Christ." ¹³Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? ¹⁴I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, ¹⁵so that no one may say that you were baptized in my name. ¹⁶(I did baptize also the household of Stephanas. Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) ¹⁷For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

Christ the Wisdom and Power of God

¹⁸For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.



Lord have mercy!

Even with the miraculous growth and spread of faith in a crucified messiah beyond the Jewish community moving into the pagan Greco-Roman world, how could things then get so bad so quickly? This church was no ephiphany of God among his people!

When we go from the pure proclamation of God bringing his reign into human history, personally embodied by the awaited messiah in the place assigned by the prophets, calling people to follow him and learn how to fish for people to church among Gentiles it all gets very difficult.

² By comparing Acts of the Apostles 18:1–17 and mentions of Ephesus in the Corinthian correspondence, scholars suggest that the letter was written during Paul's stay in Ephesus, which is usually dated as being in the range of AD 53–57.

The most basic priorities get lost. We are now very far from anything that was proclaimed or established by Jesus in Galilee 30 something years beforehand. If this church community had ever grasped and understood that it has been forgotten. Here lies the warning: Corinth is never far away.

- This church in Corinth is not in tune with the primary message of Jesus first heard around Lake Galilee.
- This church is not demonstrating a common shared gathering unto the Lord Jesus. It is seriously off-track.
- It is not the corporate epiphany or manifestation of God in Christ one would expect of Jesus people.

If fishing is about being gathered together from the power and dynamics of one world to another then something has gone very wrong here.

So after nine verses of greeting and thanksgiving, Paul points to two manifestations of this failure in the brief first hard engagement as heard today. While more sensational issues will follow Paul raises these primary concerns first.

¹⁰I appeal to you, brothers *and sisters*, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.

Chronic disunity indicates failure to hear the call and obey the message of Jesus who does not speak with a forked tongue. It suggests to my nose that there is privatization, or some mode of entitlement or excuse operating.

The positive plea in Paul's appeal is: that they/we 'be united in the same mind and the same judgment.'

In the light of Jesus' words in Capernaum a few decades beforehand, apply yourselves to seeking and embracing God's reign in your earthly lives.

Instead of there being unity of purpose in embracing God's kingdom Chloe's people have told Paul:

that there is quarreling¹² What I mean is that each one of you says, "I follow Paul," or "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas," or "I follow Christ."

Where you have people you have politics.

There is room for personal interpretation and personal style in living out one's faith. Unity does not mean all being the same. As I often say about this church: "We don't do one size fits all." and that's OK. There is obvious diversity in the New Testament through the churches written to.

What does remain central and constant is the essential question of interest. This is what matters:

- What is the mind of God here?
 - What does God's Kingdom require of us now?
 - What would the Lord Jesus want from me now?
- and
- How do I need to repent today?

Devoting ourselves to those questions makes everything a lot simpler.

Yet for some reason I often see people avoiding those questions to focus on other questions.

- Who can I follow or join?
- or
- Who can I fight?

These two questions are strangely similar.

There is a tendency to drop to the human plane in terms of those we like and those we do not like. There is a tendency to slide down to a focus on people we can follow or those we can resist following.

One area where this confusion plays is voting. Churches exercise voting as part of corporate discernment. Votes are expressions of faith in response to the question what do you believe God wants here. In democracy votes are expressions of what the voter wants. They are very different but easily collapsed into a single political model as if the church is meant to be democratic.

It seems that the Western world in particular is increasingly in political turmoil as democracy fails to deliver good government and the church can get caught up in this. We are sinking from transcendent values worth dying for to the petty politics of allegiance in tribal blocks.

In church speak this is termed as ‘Party Spirit’ where people behave as if they are political parties competing for overall control instead of preserving the unity as a prime concern. As Paul faced it:

¹² What I mean is that each one of you says, “I follow Paul,” or “I follow Apollos,” or “I follow Cephas,” or “I follow Christ.” ¹³ Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?

From over 25 years of being a church pastor I know that some people are happy with me and others are not. That’s typical church as I know it! In institutional churches this can thrive especially where power is concentrated. Parties for and against may form.

These sorts of things should not determine the state of our fellowship and the unity we hold: Unity of faith can allow for diversity of conscience as Paul will explain later in relation or what we might eat or drink. We don’t all need to have the same opinion on matters.

However, we are all meant to have the same basic orientating questions:

- What might I repent of or turn away from in order to embrace what God calls me to in His grace?
- How might I enter God’s Kingdom today?
- &
- How might I gather people to join me in that?

If these are not our orientating questions I carefully suggest that we may not be following Jesus as Matthew, Mark, Luke and John describe him. That is the Jesus who calls people to live in and enjoy God’s reign.

Application

To make this practical I would like to suggest a few good habits:

1. Keep the question before you at every juncture: “What would you want here Lord?”
 - a. It’s all about the Kingdom of Heaven where God reigns – living our life as Jesus modeled.
2. Pray about everything first – before speaking. Harder for some than others? Let God in on the business before you speak or act on it in his church.
 - a. You may have strong principles and even stronger feelings. Your culture may be deeply involved. You may even be offended! It may even be your firm opinion. Still wait in prayer and allow God to speak before you do.
 - i. Remember It’s the Lord’s church and He owns it.

3. Exercise the repentance muscle daily.
 - a. Would Jesus want you to say 'yes' or 'no' now? If 'no' practice repentance, turn away, exercise self-denial in decision against your instincts and preferences.
 - b. With exercise that muscle grows.
 - c. For the baptized this is core business which is why Paul brings up baptism to remind people and disassociate himself as he did not baptize new believers himself.
 - i. Baptism embeds us in Jesus' way.

If you do somehow blurt out an unholy or fleshy opinion, repent and start again.

This message is about remembering what makes us to be Christians following Jesus and then a church that manifests that and not just the normal people stuff at prayer or a political community with a spiritual gloss.

This could make 2020 the most amazing year.
It's all about taking Jesus seriously.