

**MATTHEW 4:12-23**  
**ST JOHN'S, 26.1.20, 9.30 am**

**INTRODUCTION**

The wonders of the internet mean that these days we can find out almost anything we want to know with a simple mouse-click. One thing I find myself doing from time-to-time is looking up actors or actresses, especially when I recognise them in a TV drama, but can't remember what other character I've seen them playing. It means I can find out not only where I've seen them before, but what they've been doing in the meantime, and so on.

Wouldn't it be great if we could do the same to find out about Jesus' life? Here, Matthew gives us no clue as to how much time passed, or what Jesus was doing, between verse 11, at the end of the temptation story, and verse 12, *when [Jesus] heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee*. Last week's gospel reading (John 1:29-42) gives us some hints. John indicates that Jesus went back to *Bethany across Jordan* (John 1:28) after he'd been baptised, and presumably after his temptations in the wilderness. We don't know exactly where this Bethany was, but John's clear that it's not in Galilee, and Matthew says here that Jesus returned to Galilee when he *heard that John [the Baptist] had been arrested*.

So it seems likely that Jesus had already met Simon and Andrew (John 1:40-42), and that since that meeting, they'd all returned to Galilee from wherever John the Baptist was baptising, although they weren't together.

Matthew tells us that Jesus left Nazareth and *went and lived in Capernaum, by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali* (v 13). Nazareth was a remote village in the hills; an ideal place for the Son of God to grow up unnoticed by wider society. But it wasn't a good place for Jesus to begin his public ministry. *No prophet is acceptable in his home town*, as Jesus himself observes in Luke 4:24. And Capernaum was much better suited as a base for Jesus' ministry. It was a traditionally Jewish town, but also a centre of local administration, with a centurion (8:5), and a customs post (9:9). Capernaum was on the north side of Lake Galilee, and on a major trade route, *the way of the sea*, or *Via Maris*, which ran from Damascus to the Mediterranean. This description of Galilee at that time was written by Stuart Blanch, a former Bishop of Liverpool:-

Galilee was the centre of a humming political and commercial life. It stood at the crossroads of the nations of the ancient world, through which the armies and the traders and the diplomats passed. There some of the greatest battles of the world had been fought . . . Galilee was the home of a thoroughly cosmopolitan population: Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic would all be heard in the markets; Syrian, Jew, Roman and Parthian mixed freely. It was a land of passing excitements and dangerous fashions, of a barbarous dialect and offensive manners.<sup>1</sup>

So Galilee, held in contempt by many of the more 'orthodox' Jews living in the southern province of Judea, was very fertile ground, well-

prepared to receive the seed of the gospel. And although Jesus' primary mission was *only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel* (15:24), in Galilee his preaching would be 'overheard' by people of many other nations, so when the time came for the mission to the Gentiles, the ground was already prepared there as well.

### **JESUS' MESSAGE**

*From that time Jesus began to preach, saying: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." (v 17).*

A few years ago, my uncle and his wife received a warning – "there's a bush fire coming this way!" They live in the hills outside Perth in Australia. It all happened very fast. The first warnings were issued at 11.00 am, and by 4.00 pm more than 250 hectares had been burnt. My uncle's house wasn't in the direct line of fire, and they had to decide whether to evacuate, or stay and defend. They stayed, and were lucky enough not to suffer injury or damage.

My uncle and his wife received an urgent warning. They had to decide what to do. Jesus' message was and is an urgent warning: the Kingdom of heaven is coming! It's coming like a bush fire! His message tells us what we need to do: *Repent*.

First-century Jews longed to see the Kingdom of heaven, or God's Kingdom, coming. They prayed for the time when God would be their King, and King of the whole world. They were working to bring about the time when God himself would rescue them and put everything right. They were prepared to die to bring closer the time when their people

would be able to worship God in justice and peace, without interference from the pagans who'd conquered their land.

Jesus' message was that this time was almost upon them! The sovereign rule of heaven was approaching like a bush fire. But of course, it's not good news for everyone. If justice and peace are coming, woe betide those who've promoted injustice and discord. If justice and peace are coming, woe betide those who cause others to lose their faith in God (Matthew 18:7). If justice and peace are coming, woe betide those who are fighting violence with violence (Matthew 26:52). If justice and peace are coming, woe betide those who deny justice to the poor, the weak, the vulnerable (Matthew 23:23). If justice and peace are coming, woe betide those who make their fortune by exploiting others. There's still time to get their act together, but that time is running out fast. People need to *repent*.

As I often say to Baptism families, the word 'repent' is a bit of Christian jargon. What it means is to 'turn away from your sins'. Too often, we think that repentance is about saying (and hopefully, feeling) 'sorry' for our private sins. But the key thing about repentance is not the saying 'sorry', or the feeling bad about what we've done wrong: the key thing is what we do about it. Jesus desperately wanted to his people to turn away from using violence to try to overcome violence; he desperately wanted his people to turn towards God's kingdom of light and peace and justice and healing and forgiveness. If they fail to heed his warning, well, *the kingdom of heaven* is coming anyway: those who don't embrace it will find that it destroys them.

## JESUS' CALL

Jesus' warning in verse 17, *Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*, gives the impression that something dramatic is about to happen, something which will have an immediate impact on world history. So it's quite surprising that the next thing which Jesus does seems so unimpressive, so low-key, so insignificant. He goes and finds four local fishermen, two pairs of brothers, and demands: *Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men*. As one of the people who taught me theology comments: 'four local fishermen don't sound like a world-changing task-force'!<sup>2</sup> As we know, Jesus and these four men, together with eight others, did dramatically change world-history; but the kingdom of heaven is like the proverbial mustard-seed: it has very small beginnings.

Simon and Andrew, James and John, were the first people to take heed of Jesus' warning, and *repent*. As their example shows though, turning away from our sins is a serious business. It can mean turning away from everything which has been important in our lives: all four of these men turned away from their livelihoods to go with Jesus; James and John also literally turned away from their own father.

## CONCLUSION

Jesus' demands today are as radical and all-consuming as they were beside Lake Galilee all those years ago. No, he doesn't call all of us to

give up our livelihoods; he doesn't call all of us to abandon our families. But he does call us all to be prepared to make those sacrifices for his sake. He doesn't allow any of us the luxury of using our work, or our family, or any of our relationships, or our hobbies, or our finances, or our health, or our social commitments, or whatever else is important to us, as an excuse for holding back, or for denying him our complete loyalty and obedience.

Jesus called Simon and Andrew, James and John, to go with him and become fishers of men. Together with the rest of the Twelve, they formed a team. They lived and worked and learned and prayed together. Jesus' call to us is the same. The Christian life isn't a private matter for the 167 hours of the week that we're not in church. We're called to live and work and learn and pray together, to build God's kingdom here in our community. We're called to go out together to teach and preach and heal in Jesus' name. We can't do these things by ourselves. So today, think and pray about the part you play in the mission of this church. Listen for Jesus' voice. If necessary, turn away from the sin of laziness or selfishness. Allow Jesus to teach you to work as part of the group of disciples here at St John's, to catch people before the Kingdom of heaven destroys them.

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<sup>1</sup> Stuart Blanch, Encounters with Jesus, quoted in Donald English, The Message of Mark, (Leicester, IVP, 1992), pp 48-49

<sup>2</sup> R T France, The Gospel of Matthew, (Grand Rapids/Cambridge, Eerdmans, 2007), p 146