

“FOLLOWING THE KING - 27”

Matthew 11:20-24

Some of you will have been following this series on sermons on Matthew’s Gospel for a while now, as we’ve been seeing how Jesus, this Kingly Messiah foretold in the Hebrew Scriptures, our Old Testament, has arrived in Galilee teaching and preaching, healing and liberating – making a difference to people’s lives in all kinds of amazing ways. But if you’ve just joined the series in the last month or so, you could be forgiven for thinking perhaps that Jesus was a bit of a gloomy old bloke, who promised little but unrelieved trouble to anyone who fancied following him. We’ve been looking at his commissioning of his new band of apostles as they get ready to go on the road and at his warnings to them about the difficulties they will encounter, at his demands for complete allegiance to him, and at his call to go all out for him and for the message of the Kingdom of God. Even John the Baptist now has his doubts as to whether this really is the Messiah whose arrival he has been announcing.

There’s no question that Jesus forces people to make decisions about him, that you cannot sit on the fence when it comes to responding to his teaching and his demonstration of the values and ideals of the Kingdom, but it does have to be said that Matthew has selected and arranged his material in a particular way which seems to bring together certain aspects of what Jesus said at certain points in his ministry. So all this tough stuff has ended up together in this couple of chapters. After all, Matthew is an author and he has put this Gospel together in a particular order and has included some of what Jesus did and said and left out other bits. John tells us explicitly in his Gospel that that has to happen: *“Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book”* (John 20:30) and *“Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written”* (John 21:25). And clearly Jesus did a great deal of stuff in the towns – or *“cities”* as Matthew calls them – around the Sea of Galilee which he hasn’t recorded, because he talks in this section about *“most of his miracles”* being performed there.

Matthew mentions Korazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum here. They were Jewish towns which had had the benefit of hearing for generations the prophecies about the Messiah, and which had seen and heard at first hand the power and authority of Jesus. They weren’t like the towns of Tyre and Sidon, Phoenician towns full of Gentiles who hadn’t read the Hebrew Scriptures and where Jesus hadn’t been to preach or to perform miracles. They weren’t like Sodom, the byword for evil, which had never had the opportunity to respond to Jesus. And Jesus denounces the indifference of Korazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum, their refusal to respond to what they have seen or heard. As Donald Hagner puts it, *“The greater the revelation, the greater the responsibility”*. Korazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum had had the opportunity to respond to Jesus – a benefit not accorded to Tyre, Sidon and Sodom – and they’d refused to take it. So Jesus has these further harsh words for them.

“Woe, woe and thrice woe”, as the late Frankie Howerd used to declaim in *Up Pompeii*. But Jesus isn’t playing for laughs here – he’s deadly (literally!) serious. He’s angry and frustrated by their refusal to respond, but it’s an anger born of pity. William Barclay writes about this passage: *“Jesus’ condemnation of sin is holy anger, but the anger comes, not from outraged pride, but from a broken heart”*. This response of Jesus to those who may not exactly have rejected him, but ignored him, is similar to his tears over the state of Jerusalem as he looks out over that city on Palm Sunday: *“As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, ‘If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace – but now it is hidden from your eyes’”* (Luke 19:41,42). Jesus’ compassionate heart is grieving for their passing up of this amazing opportunity that he handed them.

And what is main reason for this grief, for this declaration of woe? It is, says Matthew, *“because they did not repent.”* Now there’s a word we don’t hear too much about today – *“repent”*. It seems a bit harsh to us, doesn’t it? It smacks of judgementalism. It implies that there is a need to acknowledge responsibility for something going wrong, and we don’t like that today – we prefer always to shift the blame to someone else, or to circumstances or upbringing. You can only repent if you have something to repent of and most

people cannot see that they ever do anything really wrong. But it's a good biblical word – like sin. There is a realistic acknowledgement of the way in which as human beings we – all of us – have turned against God and his will for us and for this world.

“*Repent*” is a translation of a Greek word (you knew it was coming, didn't you?) – *metanoia*. We've come across it before, and it can be translated in different ways in different contexts. Sometimes it is translated as “*conversion*”, but at the root of it – and the way it was often used in Greek – there is a sense of turning round, or setting off in a different direction. Jesus was proclaiming it as the very core of his message when we first came across him preaching in *Matthew 4:17* – “*Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is near*”. And some of you may be able to recall the time we looked at Mark's Gospel and saw there (with the help of Josephus and Tom Wright) how the message, “*Repent and believe the good news*” could be legitimately translated as “*Give up your own agenda and trust me for mine*”. It's a word that speaks of transformation.

And that's the very heart of the Gospel of the Kingdom – it's all about transformation, about doing things, seeing things, experiencing things differently. Isn't that what we've seen Jesus doing so far in this Gospel? He has been transforming the way in which people look at life, giving them a whole new outlook on things. He has been transforming people's lives as he has healed and exorcised, giving the lepers and the blind, the disabled and the disadvantaged new life. He has been calling men and women to follow him and live life according to God's ways rather than their own ways. He has been re-interpreting the Law of Moses and the pronouncements of the Old Testament in ways which help people see what a transformative experience it is to turn back to God. It's a message of newness, of liberation, of hope – of transformation.

And the people of Korazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum just haven't been able to see that. They have not been open to this message. They have wanted to do their own thing. Basically, they have refused to change in response to what they have seen of Jesus. And isn't that the way with so many of us? We just don't want to change, we don't want to be any different. It's a problem for those of us within the church as well as those who are still beyond the church as yet, just as it was for those people of the lakeside towns who, no doubt, considered themselves God's people. I can think of two people in different churches (neither of them this one) – two old saints of God, as many thought – who could speak and behave outrageously to people they didn't like or agree with. One was actually an out and out bully. Both of them were challenged by church leaders about their behaviour and attitudes and both said, “That's just the way I am. No-one's going to change me now”. Jesus would have wept and called down woe on them.

You see, if you really want to follow the Kingly Messiah, if you take seriously the words and the call of Jesus, you need to allow that transformation to happen. You need to be prepared to turn round from your old ways – which is always difficult and often painful – and walk into the future along the path that Jesus has trod. You need to be able to give up your own agenda, to stop insisting that you know best, and trust Jesus for his agenda, allow his values and attitudes to shape your life. You need to believe that Jesus can do it.

It may be that you have been longing for a transformation in your own life. Things are not as they should be and you have been struggling for a long time with problems and difficulties of one sort or another. You can't see a way out of the situation you're in – maybe health-wise or job-wise or relationship-wise – but you just long for it to be different. Well, Jesus can transform that as well – if you'll let him. Just as he healed the leper, restored sight to the blind and mobility to the disabled, just as he liberated people from the hold that evil forces had over them, just as he lifted curses and offered hope – he can help you today and bring to your life that transformation that is at the heart of his message. All you need do is repent, to turn your back on what's past and open yourself up to the life-changing power of Jesus.

And those who have repented, who have allowed Jesus to transform them, can then follow him and demonstrate in their own lives the difference he has made. Ernie Whalley is the President of the Baptist

Union this year and he has taken as his theme some words from Paul's *Letter To The Philippians* which encourage the followers of Jesus to "*shine like stars in the universe*". He was speaking at our own Baptist Association's AGM this week and there were a couple of phrases he used in passing that I jotted down as he was speaking because they really chimed in with what we're talking about this morning.

Firstly he said, "*We get up each morning because Christ transforms us day by day*". You see, this transformation isn't simply a one-off experience. That was the problem with those two old saints I spoke of earlier. They knew they were Christians, but they weren't prepared to allow Jesus to go on changing them. We need to be transformed daily as we grow deeper in our love of Jesus, as we deepen our commitment to him, as we learn more about the Bible, as we develop our prayer life, as we recognise our ongoing need for forgiveness. If my relationship with my wife hadn't developed since our wedding day, life wouldn't be much fun, really. It's an ongoing thing. And so is our relationship with Jesus. Repentance, in that sense of transformation, needs to happen day by day. Begin the day by asking for God's forgiveness, so that you start the day with a clean slate, as it were. End the day by handing over to him all those things that you know you've have got wrong – and all those things that have happened to you that could easily become a source of bitterness or resentment if he isn't allowed to deal with them. Allow Christ to transform you day by day.

And secondly, Ernie Whalley said, "*Transformed people transform people.*" Allow Jesus to transform you day by day and see what an effect that has on others. As your love for Jesus grows, so will your love for those around you. As you take seriously what he teaches about the way in which we relate to each other, so those new ways of relating will affect those around you – in your family, at work, at school, in your neighbourhood. Let people see what a difference following Jesus makes. As you enjoy the forgiveness and renewal that come from true repentance, so other will notice your freedom and hope.

Just like those towns of Korazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum, you have had the opportunity to hear – and possibly to see – what the Kingdom of God is all about, what it means to follow this Kingly Messiah, Jesus. Even if this is the very first time you've heard that, you now have a responsibility to respond in some way. The response Jesus is looking for is repentance: he wants you to be prepared to be transformed by him and to live as he teaches and models in his own life. It would be an awful shame if you ended up behind Sodom when the time comes for the Kingdom to be fulfilled because you refused to respond to what he has to say. But the joy and release that come from allowing that transformation to take place are beyond anything that anyone else could offer. What will Jesus say to you? "Woe, because you did not repent"? Or "Whoa! Come and join us – for now and for eternity!"?

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The main reason for this grief, for this declaration of woe, is *"because they did not repent."* *"Repent"* seems a bit harsh to us. It smacks of judgementalism. It implies that there is a need to acknowledge responsibility for something going wrong. There is a realistic acknowledgement of the way in which as human beings we – all of us – have turned against God and his will for us and for this world.

"Repent" is a translation of a Greek word – *metanoia*. Sometimes it is translated as *"conversion"*, but at the root of it there is a sense of turning round, or setting off in a different direction. Jesus was proclaiming it as the very core of his message when we first came across him preaching in *Matthew 4:17* – *"Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is near"*. At the beginning of Mark's Gospel *"Repent and believe the good news"* could be legitimately translated as *"Give up your own agenda and trust me for mine"*. It's a word that speaks of transformation.

And that's the very heart of the Gospel of the Kingdom – it's all about transformation, about doing things, seeing things, experiencing things differently. Jesus has been transforming the way in which people look at life, giving them a whole new outlook on things. He has been transforming people's lives as he has healed and exorcised, giving the lepers and the blind, the disabled and the disadvantaged new life. He has been calling men and women to follow him and live life according to God's ways rather than their own ways.

And the people of Korazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum have refused to change in response to what they have seen of Jesus. If you take seriously the words and the call of Jesus, you need to allow that transformation to happen. You need to be prepared to turn round from your old ways and walk along the path that Jesus has trod.

Jesus can transform difficult situations as well. Just as he healed the leper, restored sight to the blind and mobility to the disabled, just as he liberated people from the hold that evil forces had over them, just as he lifted curses and offered hope – he can help you today and bring to your life that transformation that is at the heart of his message.

Questions for discussion

1. We seem to shy away from using words like "repent" and "sin" today. Why do you think that is? How does it affect the message of the Gospel?
2. In what ways is Gospel about transformation? How did Jesus demonstrate that most clearly?
3. In what ways has Jesus transformed your life?
4. *"The greater the revelation, the greater the responsibility"* (William Barclay). How does that affect our evangelism?
5. How can we be transformed day by day?
6. *"Transformed people transform people"* (Ernie Whalley). How?