

Repent. Follow me. - Jesus calls us into the love of God

Isaiah 9:1–4; Psalm 27:1–10; 1 Corinthians 1:10–18; Matthew 4:12–25

Last week, many were struck by Peter's words about God's calling. Today I would like to look together at two of Jesus' sayings from today's Gospel reading. *Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near* and *Come, follow me, and I will send you out to fish for people*. In each of these there is a call to action and a reassuring certainty. We are called into God's love and service, assured of God's love for us and for others.

When Jesus left Nazareth and went to Capernaum in Galilee, like John the Baptist and the prophets of old, he began by preaching *repentance*.

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.

Jesus' call to *repent* and his statement that *the kingdom of heaven has come near* are not two separate statements. They are closely related. Jesus called people to repent because, and in the context of the fact that, the kingdom of heaven had come near. Indeed, there is a similar relationship between whatever Jesus calls us to do, and the relevant past, present or future acts of God for our salvation.

In this saying of Jesus we are looking at a calling (*Repent,*) and a certain reassurance (*the kingdom of heaven has come near.*).

In the New Testament, statements which could be seen as commands, or more gently as callings or invitations, are used when Jesus is saying what we or someone else should or could choose to do. Certainty statements are used when discussing what God has done, is doing or will do.

Not only are both kinds of statements present in the Bible, but there is a specific relationship between them. Namely, what God calls us to do is based upon the certainty of what God has done, is doing, or will do. We are called on God's initiative, but are not compelled. We are invited to freely choose what God has prepared for us. That calling is not only a call to action but a call to enter into the kingdom of God, to enter into the love that God extends to us.

The kingdom of heaven has come near is a certainty statement that is both reassuring and relevant to those who *repent*.

The kingdom of heaven does not just happen to be near or at hand, the gospel says it has come near. There has been an action by God. Jesus has come into the lives of these people.

We have looked previously at Jesus being both God's message and God's messenger: the Word in action and made flesh. Jesus own self is the sign of, and the message about, the kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of God. To know Jesus was and is to know something of God. To see Jesus' life was and is to know something of God's plan for living.

In response to God's action in bringing His kingdom near, Jesus asked people to *repent*, to turn to a new way of living, to do it because the kingdom of heaven has come near and to do it in the context of the kingdom of heaven. If you do not repent, the kingdom of heaven has still come near but you may not experience it, or may not experience it in the same way.

Jesus called four fishermen in particular to change direction and undertake a radically new way of living – Simon and Andrew, James and John.

“Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will send you out to fish for people.”

Jesus called them to follow him, and they responded by doing just that. Why do you suppose they followed Jesus?

Here is the same pattern – a calling and a statement of reassuring certainty. *Follow me* and *I will send you out to fish for people*.

The kingdom of heaven has come near was a statement about what God had done. *I will send you out to fish for people* is a statement about what Jesus will do.

Being sent out to fish for people was a certainty statement of relevance to those who responded to the call to follow Jesus.

The four fishermen did not follow Jesus as fully-fledged disciples. Jesus taught them and empowered them as they continued to follow him. What a comfort this is. We also do not need to be fully-fledged, perfect disciples. We just need to follow Jesus. This is a certain reassurance.

He can bring us to the kingdom and use us to bring others to the kingdom, but it will only happen if we turn to him and follow him.

In Paul's letter to the Corinthians, he pointed out that we are all called to follow Jesus. John the Baptist called others to follow Jesus. *Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*, he said. (John 1:29) Peter, Paul, and many other disciples, right up to the present day, have called others to follow Jesus. In Corinth, those Christians who said they followed Paul or Peter or Apollos were pointed again to Christ. Disciples call people to follow Christ, not themselves.

Isaac Newton was a great and much acclaimed mathematician, philosopher and scientist. His work on optics revolutionised the understanding of light.

God said, *Let there be light, and there was light.* (Gen 1:3)

Alexander Pope said,

Nature, and Nature's Laws lay hid in Night:

God said, *Let Newton be! And All was Light.*

The light existed before Newton opened people's eyes to much of its nature and properties.

Disciples of Jesus can help to open people's eyes to the Light of the World.

Following the calling of Jesus is not an invitation to finding salvation through our own efforts. The calling and the assured certainty are not a simple, "Do this and you will be saved." It is more like, "Do this because look how God has loved you, does love you, and will love you." It is an invitation to respond to the love of God through his son, Jesus Christ.

In the Gospels, there are quite a few "calling and reassurance" statements.

To the rich young man, *Go, sell your possessions and give it to the poor. And you will have treasure in heaven.* (Matt 19.21)

When Jesus told Martha to *Take away the stone* from Lazarus' tomb, he reassured her *If you believe, you will see the glory of God.* (John 11: 38, 40)

Here is a double-barrelled one from John 13:34, *A new command I give you (certainty): Love one another (call to action). As I have loved you (certainty), so you must love one another (call to action).*

As Christians, it can sometimes be confusing to work out exactly who we are and how to live our lives but the simplest view may also be the truest: follow Christ as his disciples. We have been called by God's grace and will be sustained by God's Holy Spirit.

Prayer of the week for Epiphany 2

Almighty God,

by whose grace alone we are accepted
and called to your service:

strengthen us by your Holy Spirit

and make us worthy of our calling;

through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Reference

Pope, Alexander. 1730. *Epitaph: Intended for Sir Isaac Newton in Westminster Abbey*. In John Butt (ed.) *The Poems of Alexander Pope* (1965), p. 808.