

BIBLICAL RESOURCES

Is 8:23-9:3 (9:1-4); Ps 27(26) 1 Corinthians 1:10-13, 17; Matthew 4:12-23

Convert, for the kingdom of heaven has come near

Matt. 4:12 Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. 13 He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, 14 so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: 15 "Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—16 the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned."

17 From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

Matt. 4:18 As he walked 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 fish for people." 20 Immediately they left their nets and followed him. 21 As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. 22 Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

Matt. 4:23 Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

There are three scenes here: (1) the timing and location of Jesus' proclamation; (2) the call of the first disciples; (3) a general description of the ministry.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

(i) The quotation refers to a passage in Isaiah, used as the first reading. If, as is often the case, we are meant to "hear"



the context of the citation, then it becomes even more interesting:

For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this. (Is 9:6-7)

(ii) The expression "Kingdom of God" does not occur in the Hebrew Old Testament (it does once in the Greek Book of Wisdom). However, God is very regularly called King and so the rule of God is already part of the faith of the people. In particular, God's kingdom, as contrasted with earthly kingdoms, is a central topic in the Book of Daniel. This book was written in a time of persecution and looked forward to an end-time intervention of God which would establish his rule comprehensively:

And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, nor shall this kingdom be left to another people. It shall crush all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand forever. (Dan. 2:44)

Thought for the day

The heart of Jesus' proclamation is given in today's Gospel. As is often noted, the word "repent" is not the best translation of the original Greek and it would be better to use some other expression such as "convert." It really means a new way of looking at everything, a new mind or outlook. It may of course include being sorry about the past, but the real energy is towards the future: "convert and put your trust in the Good News." We could put it like this: from what are we called to conversion is important; more important is towards what are we being called?

Prayer

Open our hearts, loving Father, that we may know both healing and hope. Touch our inmost selves and bring us the wholeness we need. Plant in our hearts the vision of your reign that we be people of hope, faith and love.

This is the background to Jesus' proclamation: he belongs to the Baptist's movement, awaiting a special intervention by God. In many ways, it is the question of "where is God" in the midst of injustice and innocent suffering, a perennial human question. Daniel, John the Baptist and Jesus shared a view that God would show himself a God of justice and act.

KIND OF WRITING

(1) The first scene is a kind of epitome, a synthesis of Jesus preaching, amplified by a quotation from the Bible. Historically, Zebulun and Naphtali are two of the twelve tribes whose restoration is symbolised by the twelve apostles. (2) The call stories are technically short scenes (*chreiai*), which put their finger on the essential. It is noticeable that all dimensions of human interest (e.g. did they know him before hand? how did they feel?) are omitted and we are left with two theological aspects: the sovereign call of Jesus and the response of the disciples, apparently totally without reservation. (3) The summary statement

gives a general sense of reaction to Jesus, to be filled out in the unfolding narrative proper.

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

(1) The expression “kingdom of God/heaven” remains the central symbol of Jesus’ proclamation throughout this gospel: Matt 3:2; 4:17; 5:3, 10, 19-20; 6:33; 7:21; 8:11; 10:7; 11:11-12; 12:28; 13:11, 24, 31, 33, 44-45, 47, 52; 16:19; 18:1, 3-4, 23; 19:12, 14, 23-24; 20:1; 21:31, 43; 22:2; 23:13; 25:1. It reaches its paradoxical climax at the cross: Over his head they put the charge against him, which read, “This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.” (Matt 27:37). (2) The image of light comes back in the Sermon on the Mount: “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lamp stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” (Matt 5:14-16). (3) The disciples called eventually become the (highly symbolic) Twelve, symbolising the restoration of Israel (Matt 9:20; 10:1-2, 5; 11:1; 19:28; 20:17; 26:14, 20, 47, 53). Two texts illustrate the significance: “These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” (Matt 10:5-6); “Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.” (Matt 19:28)

ST PAUL

But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!” But not all have obeyed the good news; for Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed our message?” So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ. (Rom 10:14-17)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 12 John’s removal triggers the ministry of Jesus; Jesus moves from Judea or at least from the Jordan valley back to Galilee.

Verse 13 The tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali occupied the later Galilee. Thus Matthew is faithful to Jesus’ focus on the people of Israel. The writing seems to imply an initial return to Nazareth and then a decision to make Capernaum the centre of the ministry. A “house of Peter” in Capernaum may well go back to the first century. The sea refers to the sea of Galilee (Luke is more accurate in calling it a lake).

Verse 14 Matthew often offers “God’s perspective” by means of a citation. “This happened to fulfil” is especially evident in Matthew 1-2.

Verse 15-16 The citation is from Is 9:1. Gentiles (lit. nations) take us to the wider mission of the later church. Cf. *Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.* (Matt 28:19-20)

Verse 17 “To proclaim” gives us the significant early Christian word “kerygma” meaning effective proclamation. *Mentanoia* is better translated as “convert” rather than the more narrow “repent”. It implies a new vision, which includes repentance but is not limited to looking back to the past.

Verse 18 The call of the first disciples is recounted. Matthew keeps Mark’s rather redundant explanation “for they were fisherman.” It does lead to the metaphorical use of “fishing for people.”

Verses 19 “Follow me” is a unique expression associated only with Jesus. Jesus selects his followers; in contrast, disciples presented themselves to the rabbis for instruction. There is no story in the Synoptic Gospels of someone taking the initiative and *successfully* becoming a disciple.

Verse 20 Their business suggests the metaphor for the mission. The immediacy of their response is striking.

Verse 21-22 The hint of human interest here is not taken up, because the call stories profile the sovereign authority of Jesus, with no interest in biography or even psychology.

Verse 23 This summary anticipates Matt 8:17 and echoes Isa 53:4, part of one of the Suffering Servant songs. The little slip “their synagogues” makes it clear that the perspective of this very Jewish Gospel is after the break with Judaism.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Jesus moved to Capernaum to establish a home there, a home that would be secure and give him a base for his future ministry. Where have you found a secure base for your life and work?
2. “The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light” ... Jesus applies this to himself and his message. Who have been the Jesus people who have been a source of light to you? Have you been such a light for others?
3. “From that time Jesus began to proclaim...” This marks a turning point in the life of Jesus. From now on his mission was clear to him and he spoke out. Can you recall turning points in your life after which the future became more clear?
4. His message was a call to repentance, to a change of attitude toward God, from seeing God as one to be feared to seeing God as a God of love. When have you heard that call in your life? What was it like for you?
5. Jesus invited disciples to join him in his mission. What have been the occasions in your life when you have had an invitation to join someone in a great project? What was that like for you? Have you given that invitation to others?

6. In responding, the disciples “left their nets” to follow Jesus. Sometimes we have to disentangle ourselves from other things to give ourselves freely and wholeheartedly to a commitment. Have you experienced being “enmeshed” and being free?

7. In v. 23 we have a summary of the ministry of Jesus — “proclaiming the good news of the kingdom” and witnessing to this by teaching and healing. Who has been such a witness to you? What have been the signs that accompanied their witness? When have you done this yourself?

PRAYER

God of salvation, the splendour of your glory dispels the darkness of earth, for in Christ we behold the nearness of your kingdom.

Now make us quick to follow where he beckons, eager to embrace the tasks of the gospel.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.