

Sermon for 22<sup>nd</sup> January, 2017

Matthew's gospel reading today is about the beginning of Jesus' public ministry.

Jesus is fresh from his baptism and temptation in the desert, John the Baptist has been imprisoned by Herod and is no longer on the scene, and the time has come for Jesus to become known by all.

John's call to repentance is taken up by Jesus as he proclaims. "Repent for the kingdom of God has come near." It is important for Matthew's Gospel to stipulate the continuity of Jesus work with all that had gone before.

Matthew more than once emphasises this, for this gospel in particular is keen to show that Jesus and his teachings fulfil what had been prophesied in the scriptures.

Jesus leaves Nazareth after John's arrest and begins his public ministry in Capernaum a city *by the sea* in the province of Galilee.

Capernaum was to become *his own city* and the move is seen to be a fulfilment of prophesy.

As we hear from Isaiah this morning: *In the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. The people who walked in darkness.... On them light has shined.*

The ancient historian Josephus, tells us that there were no fewer than 204 villages in the province of Galilee, none of them with under 15,000 inhabitants.

So Jesus begins his work in a highly populated area which was geographically part of one of the most important trade routes in the East, and where the population was volatile, open to change and always ready for sedition.

Interestingly Galilee was also a place despised by the Jews further south in Jerusalem.

They referred to the province as Galilee of the Gentiles, which was the highest of all insults to Jews living there.

So it seems it was the perfect place for Jesus to start his ministry and to choose his disciples. Among all the misfits, a place well away from the orthodox, the seemingly morally righteous, and among the greatest masses of unreached humanity.

Jesus made this area the centre of his ministry. The people who had walked in darkness saw the light of the world.

Now what message underpins Jesus ministry is the call to repentance.

From the beginning of his ministry it is the key theme and again he emphasizes it near the close, when he urges his disciples to give prominence to it in their preaching. (Luke gospel 24:46-47.)

We may have sometimes wondered why repentance is such an integral component of discipleship.

Why it is so important?

Now while many of us may have our thoughts on what it is, we do see in the New Testament a clear definition.

There are several key elements in the parables in the gospels that show us clearly that repentance begins with a feeling of sorrow for sin and a seeking of forgiveness.

It doesn't stop there however.

It is also an act of turning away from sin and altering completely the course and motivation of one's life. And it is to trust completely in the grace of God.

We see all of these key elements in the parables of the prodigal son, Zacchaeus the tax collector and the rich man who renounced his attachment to material possessions.

How we ourselves view the act of repentance, varies usually by the way we see God in our lives.

In times past some zealous church leaders have been known to put the fear of God into the lives of their people by threatening them with the ways of a God who is like some sort of ogre constantly looking over their shoulder just waiting for them to slip up so that he can punish them.

Or others have used shame as a tool to turn people around.

Such approaches have generally been counterproductive.

For many it has stopped them from looking at themselves honestly through feelings of fear or shame.

Then there are those who believe that they are so out of step with God's ways, that God could never forgive them or love them.

Then others who think they have no need of repentance, because they can justify every move they make.

But I want to say to you that these examples are not how it is.

Repentance is a gift of God and the responsibility and duty of every person.

Repentance is in fact a natural part of our relationship with God through Christ in whom we know we can trust.

In the stillness, the quietness of this relationship, there is a tender loving environment in which we are unconditionally accepted.

An environment that is safe, and where we can allow God to gaze upon us in his abiding and tender love while revealing things that are far from the orthodox or seemingly morally righteousness of our being, and things that are part of our unreached true humanity.

This is the area where Jesus Christ began his ministry geographically and it is where he begins his ministry in us personally.

The reason that repentance is so vitally important in discipleship is that it precedes our transformation.

Without repentance there can be no transformation or holiness.

It changes us into a Christlikeness in which we are more effective as his body in the world and through which people can see that the kingdom of God has indeed drawn near.

The Lord be with you.