

Repent! Change Everything!

A sermon on Matthew 4: 12-23 by Nathan Nettleton, 22 January 2023

© LaughingBird.net

Message

In the encounter with Jesus, we realise how radically different the world is and how completely we need to change.

Sermon

From the outset of his ministry, Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

I had the slightly disturbing experience one time of attending a lecture by a well-regarded Christian theologian who appeared to have very little idea what salvation was or why anyone might need it. I don’t think I was jumping to conclusions about him, because he was asked quite directly in the question time how we might most appropriately proclaim the need for salvation to the present generation, and he quite noticeably floundered. He said it was difficult because most people in our society were getting along quite well and that perhaps our message was that they didn’t need to have their lives defined by their accumulation of material possessions but that there was a better way.

This struck me as a quite bizarre answer, because for most people, the accumulation of material things is their concept of salvation. They accumulate money and possessions in order to protect themselves against the things they fear: disaster, sickness, loneliness, meaninglessness, helplessness, violence, and oblivion.

And so to proclaim that they don’t need the money and possessions is to say little more than that, amidst the fearful storms of life, your lifeboat is not that good. People who are afraid of drowning do not quibble about the relative merits of different lifeboats. If they’re in one and it is still keeping them afloat, they are not going to jump back into the raging sea just because someone says there’s a better one available if you swim over there.

The idea of a lifeboat is both a very biblical image of salvation, and a rather topical one for us here in Australia in recent months. A lot of people have needed lifeboats lately, and a lot of them weren’t even at sea. They weren’t anywhere where the need for a lifeboat seemed likely enough to prepare for. They were in inland towns and on outback farms, and the floods rose up, or in some places came raging through like a tsunami, and suddenly lifeboats looked like the only hope.

The first letter of Peter, which we didn’t hear tonight, reminds us that so it was in the days of Noah. No one had any idea that the ground they were standing so confidently on would soon be under water, and so they were unprepared when the flood came and they were washed away.

Probably the thing that worried me most in the strange answer from that theologian was the idea that most people in our society were getting along quite well. If it was true, how come we are facing record levels of depression, record levels of suicide, record levels of marriage failure, record levels of substance abuse, and a chronic inability to do anything about war and pollution and poverty and climate change and racism and violence and so many other things?

We are drowning in these things. How can anyone stand in the midst of all that and say that most people in our society are getting along quite well. The answer of course is that denial is part of the problem. A major part. One of our major coping mechanisms is to pull in our horizons and focus on what is good close to home and block out any real awareness of what is threatening it all from beyond. This is also known as the head-in-the-sand reflex. And money, possessions and entertainment are an important part of this denial, because they strengthen our sense that we're okay and they help distract us and dull our awareness of whatever might be going on beyond the edges of our little cocoon of complacency.

This head-in-the-sand reflex is entirely understandable. Most of us are doing it to a greater or lesser extent. It is the natural human response to sensing that things are going wrong but feeling powerless to do anything about it. When we are faced with enormous dangers like climate change and global poverty and social breakdown, most of us feel that we have no idea what to do that could possibly make any difference, and we respond by clinging even more tightly to whatever seems to make our own lives okay in our present circumstances and shutting down our awareness of the dangers.

In recent months, Australia has copped some of the biggest floods on record, and some areas have been hit hard two or three times in a matter of months. As the floods subside and the cleanup progresses, we will once again see two different kinds of reactions.

There will be those who say, "Change everything! The future has drawn near and made itself known." And there will be those who say "These things are once in a hundred year events. Everything will be fine. Business as usual." One group will think the others have got their heads in the sand, and the other will think the former are panic merchants. Both can muster good statistical evidence in their defence. Only time will tell who is right, although the once-in-a-hundred-years line is getting harder and harder to sustain and is certainly losing supporters.

I want you to put yourself for a minute into the mindset of those who see the floods as a warning of what is to come. For many of you, this is probably what you think about climate change anyway, but even if that's not you, imagine your way into it for a moment. You see these recent floods as further evidence of the chaos that climate change is bringing, and you are sure that we are only going to see more such extreme weather events and more and more frequently.

And so, naturally, you would want to make changes. Major changes. It's no good rebuilding and refurnishing your house on the flood plain if you reckon it's just going to keep flooding again and again and more frequently. There might not be much you can do to turn around the effects of climate change, but you can choose not to live on the flood plain anymore. It's time for change. Serious change.

Now if you can imagine your way into that mindset and that reaction, then I think you've begun to get a handle on the nature of what Jesus was saying when he said, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." I don't mean that he was talking about climate change, although if he was saying it now he'd no doubt be including that. What I mean is that he is saying that you have been given a glimpse of the future and so the only sensible response is to rearrange your life accordingly. In your encounter with Jesus, a light has been thrown on what

is really going on and what life is really all about and if you've seen it, it's time to get your head out of the sand and start living your life on the basis of what has been brought to light.

This word "repent" is not some special spiritual word that only applies to some little spiritual compartment of your life where you pray a little prayer and get forgiven and then go on with everything else pretty much as though nothing happened. It means "turn around" or "change direction". It is the big reorientation of your life; getting back on track.

Although they don't usually use the word repent, you often hear people talking about this after some surviving some major threat to their lives; recovering after a near fatal accident, or surviving a heart attack or a major cancer. Survivors often talk about taking a good hard look at themselves and rearranging all their priorities; turning their lives around because they suddenly realised how fragile and precious it was and that the things that really matter were not the things they had been putting their time and energy into.

That's repentance. It's a perfect illustration of the dictionary definition of the word. It is not necessarily always the particular repentance that Jesus is calling for, but we have to understand what the word means before we can have any idea what sort of repentance Jesus is calling for.

The big difference between the experience of repentance after the flood and the repentance that Jesus calls for is that one is based on the revelation of how bad things can get, and the other is on the basis of how good and right things can get. Jesus is not saying "repent or you'll all die." He is saying, "the kingdom of heaven has come near."

Or in other words, you've been given a glimpse of the truth about the world and about God and about how life can be lived, so now begin to live accordingly. In me, says Jesus, you've seen what a culture of love and mercy and peace and reconciliation looks like. In me you've seen how life can be lived without bitterness and retaliation and revenge, and how love and joy and hope can shape everything we do. Such a culture is the kingdom of heaven, and it has drawn near to you. You who sat in the deep darkness have now seen a great light dawning. So now is your opportunity to turn your lives around and begin to live accordingly; to live out the culture of heaven; to live as you were created to live.

This is what happened for those first disciples, Peter and Andrew, and James and John, as they encountered Jesus on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. They saw the light. In the encounter with Jesus, they saw that the world was not as they had previously thought it to be. The ground they had been standing on now seemed like a flood plain and they saw how radically different things could be, so they dropped everything and followed the one in whom the kingdom of heaven had drawn near to them.

As we gather this evening around the Word and around the Table, Jesus is present, and in him the kingdom of heaven draws near to us too. And we too are called to turn things around and follow him.

In some ways what we do in church doesn't matter that much. Some come to church to stick their heads in the sand. If we glimpse the truth of the kingdom here and it makes no difference to the way we live tomorrow, we are like those who simply rebuild and refurnish

their houses without even pausing to question whether the flood is a warning that things need to change.

But whether or not some just ignore it, in Word and Table and gathered communion, the call is ringing out to you, to me, to us. “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near. Repent. Change everything.”