

The Kingdom is Here

Date: 1 February 2026

Location: St George's, Battery Point

Series: Matthew - Following the King

Texts: Isaiah 9:2-7, 1 Thessalonians 1.3-10; Matthew 4:12-25

When Bryan Stevenson was a young law student in the early 1980s, he took a summer internship in Atlanta, Georgia, working on death-penalty cases. His first assignment was to visit a condemned man in prison on death row. Stevenson arrived nervous and flustered and was ushered into an interview room where he was introduced to Henry. He kept tripping over his words apologising he wasn't a real lawyer. But they connected and ended up talking and sharing life stories well past the time allotted for the visit. As the angry guard manhandled the shackled Henry out of the room the condemned man broke into the words of an old hymn,

I'm pressing on the upward way,
New heights I'm gaining every day;
Still praying as I'm onward bound,
Lord, plant my feet on higher ground.

Stevenson sat down stunned. In his autobiography *Just Mercy*, he writes, "I had no right to expect anything from a condemned man on death row. Yet he gave me an astonishing measure of his humanity." The encounter transformed Stevenson's life. He had been undecided about law, but from that point he dedicated himself to helping prisoners on death row. He start the Equal Justice Initiative, dedicating his life to defending the poor, the wrongly condemned, and people society preferred not to see. His work has since helped free dozens of innocent people from death row and reshape conversations about justice and mercy in the United States.

As we start this year we're reading the Gospel of Matthew together. I've been a bit behind in my planning, but I've finally landed on a series title. *Following the King*. (Not that these things matter too much!) One of the big themes in Matthew is that Jesus is the Messiah, the King of God's kingdom. With his coming the kingdom of God comes. Today in Matthew 4 we read of Jesus starting his ministry. And we see him calling the first disciples. That encounter with Jesus turned their world upside down and transformed their lives. Jesus' invitation to Peter and Andrew, James and John is the same invitation he offers to you and to me, to come and follow him. And that is for all of us, whether you've been at church for a long time or if you're here checking this whole Christianity thing out. This morning we're going to look at 3 points: The announcement, the invitation and the response.

The announcement 4.12-17

Jesus begins his public ministry with this announcement, we read verse 17, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

Earlier in chapter 4 we read that straight after his baptism Jesus was tempted in the wilderness for 40 days. Now John has been put in prison. His work of preparing the way for the coming of the Lord has been completed. And so now Jesus begins his ministry.

Matthew says that Jesus withdrew to Galilee and lived in Capernaum. In 2018 I had the great privilege of visiting the Holy Land. One of the places I went to was Capernaum. It's right on the shore of the sea of Galilee, otherwise known as lake Tiberius. We know from Matthew, Mark and Luke that Jesus' healed Simon Peter's mother in law and it seems like Jesus' lived in Peter's house in Capernaum. Archaeologists have found Peter's house, and in the 1980s this spaceship-like church was built over it. It's just across the ancient road from the reconstructed 1st century synagogue.

Matthew draws attention to the fact that Jesus' ministry in Galilee, fulfills what Isaiah had said, 700 years earlier:

‘Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali,
the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan,
Galilee of the Gentiles –
16 the people living in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of the shadow of death
a light has dawned.’

The light, of course, is Jesus himself. At the time of Jesus' ministry, Galilee had a mixed population of Jews and non-Jews, that is Gentiles. This by the way is simply the Latin word for nations, and for the ancient Jews it had a similar sense to the idea of the “infidel” in Islam.

By drawing our attention to this prophecy Matthew signals right at the start of Jesus' ministry that Jesus is not just the Jewish Messiah. He has come for people of all nations. And the same is true today. Jesus is not just for white people from countries with a “Christian” past. He is for all peoples and nations. In fact, the church today is the most ethnically and linguistically diverse organisation in the world. We have a little taste of that here in St George's with people from palawa, Chinese, Italian, Japanese, Indian, German, French, as well as Anglo heritage.

The Torres Strait Islander peoples celebrate the coming of the Light on July 1, the anniversary of the coming of the Good News of Jesus with 2 missionaries from the London Missionary Society and 8 Melanesian evangelists. That name picks up the words that Matthew quotes from Isaiah, that with Christ the light has come. He is the light of the world and he has come to us who live in darkness, in the land of the shadow of death. We don't have to look very far to see that darkness is a feature of the world we live in. We see it in international conflict. We see it in hatred and violence. We see it in addictions and relationship breakdowns. We see it in our own tendency to repay evil with evil, rather than with good. It's to people just like you and me that Jesus has come.

Jesus begins his ministry by preaching the same message as John, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." Just a quick word on what the kingdom of heaven means. In Mark and Luke Jesus preaches about the Kingdom of God. This is exactly the same thing as the kingdom of heaven. The difference is that because Matthew is writing to a Jewish audience, and the Jews of his day were very mindful of the 4th command not to take God's name in vain, so rather than name God directly, he does so indirectly, by speaking of "heaven", the place of God's throne. This helps us understand what the kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of God is. It is the place where God is king, where God rules. And Jesus says "It has come near, God's rule is close at hand."

Jesus establishes God's kingdom by what he says and what he does, because he is God's king. In verses 23-24 we see God's kingdom breaking into this dark world as Jesus preaches the good news that the kingdom has come, and then shows this by healing sickness, disease, mental illness and even the demonic. He is the light, shining on those dwelling in darkness.

With the healing of those demonized, we see something of the spiritual reality of the world unveiled. Jesus and the rest of the New Testament speak of there being 2 kingdoms in this world, the kingdom of darkness and the kingdom of light. The kingdom of Satan, the great adversary, and the kingdom of God. And Jesus has come to rescue people from the kingdom of darkness, and bring them into his kingdom.

I grew up as a missionary kid in PNG, and this spiritual view of the world was a daily experience for people. To become a Christian was to change allegiances. It was to move from the kingdom of darkness, the kingdom of Satan and the spiritual practices of the ancestors, and to follow Jesus, the king of God's kingdom. Sometimes that meant burning things that had been used in magic or in praying to the ancestral spirits.

This is what Jesus means when he says, Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near. It means to cut ties with the old kingdom, and to swear allegiance to him as your new king. It is to surrender to him as the one who has the right to rule your life.

This is Jesus' announcement, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." Will you hear it?

The Invitation 4.18-22

In verses 18-22 we see Jesus make a personal invitation to become part of his kingdom. This is his invitation: "Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of people."

18 As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. **19** 'Come, follow me,' Jesus said, 'and I will send you out to fish for people.' **20** At once they left their nets and followed him.

As we read all the Gospels we see that Matthew has presented this scene as a snapshot of Jesus' invitation and our response. There's a whole backstory and personal history that lead up to this moment for Simon, Andrew, James and John. In Luke Jesus has already been teaching and healing before he calls Simon to follow him. In John's Gospel, it's Andrew who first encounters Jesus, who then calls his brother Simon to meet Jesus. It is the same with us. We all have our own backstories and history with Jesus. Maybe you're here and you really are new and you know next to nothing about Jesus and the Christian faith. Maybe you went to church as a kid and walked away and something has drawn you back. Maybe you've been wrestling with who Jesus' is and what he calls you to for some time. Whatever your story, Jesus' invitation is still the same, "Come, follow me." The question is, how will you respond?

"Come, follow me" is an invitation to discipleship. In Jesus' day students usually chose their rabbi depending on his reputation. Here Jesus flips the script. He called Simon, Andrew, James and John by name, to come and follow him. He is calling you by name. He wants you to follow him. He wants you to be his disciple. He wants you to learn from him. He wants you to be with him, to walk with him, to follow his teaching and his example.

If you want to know what a Christian is, this is it. It's someone who has responded to Jesus' invitation, "Come, follow me." It's not about being a good person, or following a set of rules, or even going to church. It's someone who follows Jesus. Repenting is saying goodbye to the old life. The new life is following Jesus as your master and your king.

And what does Jesus say, “I will make you fishers of people”, or in the old more catchy, but less PC phrase, “fishers of men”. Of course this picture fits well with Simon, Andrew, James and John’s profession as fishermen. But it’s a simple picture isn’t it. Fishing for people. It’s simply what we read Andrew did in John’s Gospel when he met Jesus. He ran to his brother Simon and said, “We have found the Messiah!” And then he brought him to meet Jesus.¹ That’s all being a fisher of men is. It’s inviting people to come and meet Jesus. Notice that being a fisher of men is not an option extra to being a disciple. It’s part and parcel of being a Christian. But if Jesus is the Messiah, the king of God’s kingdom, the light shining in our darkness, the one who brings healing and wholeness, how could we not invite people to meet him?!

There’s 3 simple steps to how you can do that. Pray. Care. And Share. The first is pray for the people you know, your friends, family, neighbours, colleagues. The second is care. Show people the love of God by loving them, no strings attached. Then as they know they are loved, you will have opportunities to Share, to invite people like Andrew, to come and meet the one who loves you and who has called you and who loves and calls them.

Our response 4.20, 22

How did Simon and Andrew, James and John respond to Jesus’ invitation. It’s there in verses 20 and 22. “At once they left their nets and followed him.” “Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.” This was a transformative moment. They had been fishermen. Now, following Jesus, they had become fishers of men. Meeting Jesus turned their world upside down. Their whole way of life was overturned. Their old life died. A new life was born. They experienced a radical re-ordering of priorities. No longer were fishing and their father, work and family their governing priorities. It was Jesus, and following him.

Oh yes, there was a whole story behind all this. But Matthew presents this as the moment of choice for Simon and Andrew, James and John. Would they say “Yes” to Jesus, and follow wherever he called them? Even in this brief picture we can see that this meant surrender and trust. Surrender to Jesus as the king. And trust that he would provide. To trust their future and their families to God’s care, and to follow Jesus empty handed.

Kanishka was a young Sri Lankan Buddhist studying law at Sydney University. One day he asked a friend what it meant for him to be a Christian. His friend said, “Being a Christian

¹ John 1.40-42

means I've lost control of my life to Jesus Christ." His friend's answer was both unexpected and confronting for Kanishka.

"As a Buddhist, I was engaged in an activity which was aimed at achieving mental and spiritual control," he explained. "So to hear someone I respected and admired say that they'd lost control to a figure that was long dead? It was a breathtaking answer and why it stayed with me, I suppose."

Kanishka's friend gave him the Gospel of John to read. He was struck by the Jesus he encountered as he read. When he came to chapter 10, he read, "The [people] who heard these words were divided." He thought, "Whose side am I on?" And then, eventually, "I can't see any reason not to be on Jesus' side," and he gave his life to Christ. Some years later Kanishka trained for ministry and now serves as the Archbishop of Sydney.²

Jesus says, "Come, follow me. And I will make you fishers of men." Will you turn to him? Will you surrender to him and trust him with the whole of your life? You might not become an archbishop, (although who knows!), but you can shine the light of Christ in your family, in your school, at uni, in your workplace, and invite people to come and meet Jesus.

² <https://www.cms.org.au/stories/a-very-surprised-christian/> <https://eternitynews.com.au/christian-living/i-abandoned-buddhism-to-follow-jesus-christ-kanishka-raffel/>