

# *“According to Matthew”*

A study of the Gospel of Matthew

*Part 5: The Work Begins*

We continue our study of the Gospel of Matthew. Let us recap where we have been.

We began with the begats and the impressive ancestry of Jesus. We witnessed dreams of Joseph and journeys of Wise Men. We moved on to consider the unique nature of the authority Jesus would be called to embody, and witnessed the life of King Herod the Great who was the absolute opposite of a godly King.

We stood on the banks of the Jordan to witness both John’s proclamation and the baptism of Jesus as the beloved Son of God upon whom the Spirit rested. Last time we headed into the wilderness and pondered the temptations Jesus was subjected to. Now the work begins.

Matthew 4:12-16

**<sup>12</sup> When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he returned to Galilee. <sup>13</sup> Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali-- <sup>14</sup> to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah: <sup>15</sup> “Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the way to the sea, along the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles-- <sup>16</sup> 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.”**

Notice when Jesus begins His ministry. John has been arrested and taken to prison. John’s crime is that he speaks out against the actions of Herod in taking his brother’s wife for his own. But we return to that in a later chapter. What is important for Matthew is not historical time, but theological time.

The time of John the Baptists ministry had come to an end. It was time for the ministry of Jesus to begin. John’s work of baptizing was complete. He had proclaimed the One who was coming and witnessed His advent. His work provided a platform upon which Jesus could build. But not in Nazareth.

Before Jesus begins there has to be a move. It is probable that the same forces in Nazareth that had led to John’s arrest would have strongly opposed the work of Jesus. Nazareth would become known as rather hostile towards the things of God. In John’s gospel we are even given a picture of a future disciple Nathaniel, sarcastically asking, “Can anything good come from Nazareth?” (John 1:46)

There seems to be something about ministry that makes it difficult to minister in ones hometown. Jesus would later teach His disciples; *“Only in his hometown and in his own house is a prophet without honor.”* (Mat 13:57). He cannot work miracles in Nazareth because of their lack of faith. Jesus relocates to Capernaum.

I have to say I can't imagine myself returning to the town in which I grew up to minister. People see you 'as you were' rather than 'how you are'. Human nature alone offered a reason why Jesus needed to relocate.

Yet Matthew roots this move, as he has done with all the previous moves made by the family of Jesus, to Old Testament Scripture. Again he turns to Isaiah and quotes from Isaiah chapter 9.

**1 Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the Gentiles, by the way of the sea, along the Jordan<sup>2</sup> The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned. (Isa 9:1-2 NIV)**

It is interesting to look at Matthew's quotes in their original context. Isaiah Chapter 9 also includes passages such as verses 6 and 7, which we often heard read at Christmastime. Listen in this passage for the images of divine son-ship and also of kingly rule and authority. If indeed Matthews intended audience was the Jewish community, the significance of quoting from Isaiah 9 would not be lost upon them.

**For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this. (Isa 9:6-7 NIV)**

There were other considerations why moving to Galilee was significant. Galilee was the most northerly district of Palestine. For over 500 years, from the eight century up until the second century BC it had been largely in Gentile hands. Its population was therefore of mixed racial and religious origin. It was a densely populated region open to new ideas. There would be no shortage of an audience. Josephus says of the Galileans, "They were ever fond of innovations, and by nature disposed to changes and delighted in sedition's".

Jesus would find in Galilee the kind of audience that He never would have found in Nazareth. To put it plainly, there were those in Nazareth who looked down their noses at Galilee because of its cosmopolitan nature. Yet, according to Isaiah, this place some viewed as one of darkness, would become the home to a great light in the person of Jesus Christ. So it begins. Verse 17.

**<sup>17</sup> From that time on Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."**

The one born to be King begins to proclaim the Kingdom. To quote from the New Interpreters Bible Commentary:

"For Matthew the kingdom of God was not an ideal, a principle, or an

abstraction, but was definitively revealed and embodied in the life and ministry of Jesus. This is why "kingship" language is so important throughout the Gospel of Matthew, from the opening scenes in which the newborn king is a threat to the kingdoms of this world (2:1-23), to the closing scenes, in which the "king of Israel" is the crucified one who gives himself for others and then is vindicated and given "all authority" (28:16-20)."

This proclamation of 'the Kingdom as near' is in essence that which John the Baptist declared and which the first disciples will also proclaim following the resurrection. There is a sense of continuity. The message doesn't change. Neither does the methodology by which we are to embrace the message. John proclaimed 'Repent', Jesus declares 'Repent', and the early church will likewise declare 'Repent'.

'Repent' is one of many words that have become tinged in the popular mind with negative connotations. I immediately think of cartoon characters and religious cranks holding billboards with the message 'Repent the End is near' scribbled upon them in big bold letters. If I encounter such characters in the street I do my best to avoid them!

Repentance in essence means turn around, refocus, and embrace something new. It is not an injunction to grovel in fear at some imagined forthcoming disaster in order that we may be saved from the terrors to come. Indeed the proclamations that Jesus will make lack the element of fear. That is not to say there is not a sense of urgency in His acts and His teaching, rather that it is always tempered by love rather than fear. 1 John 4:18 tells us: *'There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment.'*

Jesus is announcing that something has happened, something awesome that can change the way we see the world. And it's not happening down the road or far away, it's happening here and now. It's near! He invites us onboard by calling us to change the way we do things in order that this new order of His Kingdom can become a priority in our own lives. As we will see in a moment the call to general repentance is linked to the personal call to follow Him and become His disciples.

William Barclay puts it this way *"The message of Jesus consisted of a command which was the consequence of a new situation"*. Jesus invites repentance; turning from our own way towards God's way, a change in direction that orientates our hearts towards eternity. *'God had invaded earth in Jesus Christ, and therefore it was of paramount importance that a man should choose the right side and the right direction.'*

In past sessions I've invited you to consider movie imagery when looking at Matthew's gospel. I don't know if you are familiar with the 'Blues Brothers' movie where Jake and Elwood are on a 'Mission from God'. As the mission commences the first thing they do is 'put the band back together' so that the music may be played.

Well, if Matthew were a movie, Jesus is about to recruit the band members. Let us take a look at verses 18 through 22.

**<sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of men." <sup>20</sup> At once they left their nets and followed him. <sup>21</sup> Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, <sup>22</sup> and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.**

Though a short passage, for Matthew this is an important one. It marks the beginning of the church as a community. The first disciple mentioned is Simon to whom Jesus would eventually say: *"And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it"* (Mat 16:18). It is only now that we start to see that the gospel is not simply a story about the life of Jesus Christ, but also an explanation of the community He brings into existence.

It is also significant that it is Jesus who seeks the disciples out, not the other way around. The traditional way of doing things was that students would seek out a rabbi, not rabbi's to go searching for students. There is a statement in John's gospel, 15:16 *"You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit--fruit that will last."*

We notice that the brothers are in the midst of a working day. Two are out at sea casting the nets, two are on the shore preparing the nets with their Father Zebedee. There is no hint of them being engaged in any kind of spiritual search or quest. John's gospel suggests that they knew of Jesus before He calls them. Matthew leaves us guessing.

If we were to spend some time listening to the stories of folks who have joined the church, I'm sure we would be impressed by the variety of avenues through which they came. Some would maybe speak of dramatic conversions, others of life events that caused them to rethink their life direction. For others they would suggest that they couldn't remember a time when the faith was not part of their family life or upbringing

A common factor would be, that at some point in their life, they realized that following the way of Jesus Christ was significant and that the best way they could do so was to use the gifts they had accumulated in their lives for some higher purpose than just putting food on the table.

Such is the call that Jesus offers the brothers. Verse 19 *"Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of men."* They knew how to fish for fish. Catching people with the gospel would require some extra training but still utilize many skills they had gained out on the waters.

I'm sure I could at this stage wax lyrical about the fisherman's task, but as the only

times I've ever been fishing I've hardly caught a darn thing... I would be speaking from the depths of my ineptitude. William Barclay however has a greater familiarity with the fisherman's task.

#### The qualities of a good fisherman.

1. **Patience.** You have to wait for the fish to take the bait.
2. **Perseverance.** Discouragement has to be overcome. You always have to try again!
3. **Courage.** The boat is small, the sea is large, and the weather unpredictable.
4. **An eye for the right moment.** Know when to cast and when not to cast.
5. **Fit the bait to the fish.** Know what bait attracts what fish and use it accordingly.
6. **Keep self out of sight.** Fish who see shadows tend not to bite.

These, suggests Barclay, are skills any faithful Christian seeking to reach others with the gospel, should cultivate.

Peter and Andrew's response to the call of Jesus is dramatic: verse 20 *"At once they left their nets and followed him."* The New International Bible commentary suggests *"We are met here with Jesus' first miracle, the miracle of his powerful word that creates following, that makes disciples."* The Church is created through response to Christ's call.

The response of James and John also points out that they leave not only their trade, but also their family behind in response to the call. Verse 22 *"And immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him."* Discipleship has implications for even our closest relationships. Whilst we do not know what became of 'Zebedee and Sons' fishing business, tradition has it that their mother was a lady called Salome, and that both she and her husband became faithful supporters of the mission of Jesus.

Having begun to put the band together the mission from God continues. Verses 23 through 25.

<sup>23</sup> **Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.**

<sup>24</sup> **News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed, and he healed them.**

<sup>25</sup> **Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him.**

The mission at this stage is threefold. Preaching, Teaching and Healing. Jesus is at this stage welcomed in the synagogues to interpret the Word and teach its implications. He preaches a Good News Kingdom. That Good News is given substance by the loving actions of healing and deliverance that come through His ministry.

Preaching, Teaching and Healing remain three vital aspects of the Churches Mission. We gather around the Word that we may learn to be fishers of people. We reach out

into our community in order that the hungry may be fed and those in circumstances of need be lifted up. We seek to be a healing presence in each other's lives, lifting up in prayer the needs of our families and our world.

I recently watched a debate (that appeared on Canadian TV) between former British Prime-Minister Tony Blair (who is a practicing Catholic) and Christopher Hitchens, a well-known author and atheist. Hitchens, who is an engaging and entertaining speaker, was keen to point out the many failings of religion and contradictions of belief.

Tony Blair's response was to point out that contradictions and failings were not the whole story and spoke of the positive things that happened through people lives that would not have come into being without faith in a power greater than themselves. He spoke eloquently of his personal faith in God.

Jesus often spoke of faith being recognized through the good fruits it produced. When folk are being lifted up and empowered, or being helped through times of illness or disaster, then the church is proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom. We may indeed be wounded healers, we usually have the sense to admit our imperfections and mistakes of the past, but nevertheless we still hear the call of Jesus Christ to be His disciples and demonstrate good news.

Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan are hardly likely to flock to our doors, but our calling is not to be crowd pleasers but faithful followers. We will see in future sessions that crowds are fickle, and that even for disciples some of their most important lessons are learnt through their failures.

Next time though we begin to look at what many describe as the greatest sermon ever preached - the 'Sermon on the Mount'. We will see that just as the Kingship of Jesus was unlike that of any other King, the rules by which the Kingdom operated were unlike any other the world had ever seen.