

## Year A Epiphany 3 Choosing to Be Light Matthew 4 vv12 to 23

Like many other stories found in Matthew's Gospel, this story makes a great blueprint for our lives as Christians – it tells us something very important about the Kingdom of God and then it tells us what we are to do with that information.

It is no coincidence that Matthew quotes the Hebrew Scripture which says, “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” and immediately after those words, Matthew brings Jesus onto the scene proclaiming the good news, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

There is no mistaking the connection – Jesus, and what he will do, is the great light, Jesus is dispelling the darkness, and Jesus is showing us the kingdom of God.

For as long as people have experienced light and darkness, there have been strong interpretations to accompany those concepts – in our society, the bad guys dress in black; Darth Vader and the rest of the evil empire in Star Wars belong to the “Dark Side”; and most people experience a fear of the dark at some point in their lives.

Light, on the other hand, brings to mind goodness, warmth, comfort...A candle in the window on a dark night; the glow of a fire through the trees guiding you to safety; the light at the end of the tunnel; and much, much more...

Without us even consciously thinking about it, all of these wonderful notions and conceptions of light come together for us as we think of Jesus and know that he is our light.

Most importantly, light allows us to see and light brings understanding – the light bulb over the head sort of thing when we suddenly know what's going on.

Conversely, in the darkness, we are blind and blindness is equated with not knowing – with not understanding. We are told many times throughout the gospels that the Pharisees are blind – meaning they don't understand what Jesus is trying to teach them – they don't understand how to see the kingdom of God. They are blindly following the rules of the law without truly understanding what God wants them to have in their hearts. Jesus is quite harsh when he points this out to them. I enjoy this quotation so I'll share the whole thing with you. Jesus says to the pharisees: "you tithe the mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith; these you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!"

They're blind. They just don't get it.

But we get it. With the light of Christ, we get it. Because we believe that Christ is the Son of God, we have opened ourselves up to understanding. We have allowed the light of Christ to shine on our fears and darkness and to chase them away. Jesus has opened our hearts and our minds and our eyes to see the kingdom of God.

How does he do that? How do we see the kingdom of God? Jesus gives us two instructions in this gospel reading – "Repent" and "Follow me".

Repent: It is Jesus's first public demand so it must be important. The Greek word that Matthew used was "metanoia" which, as I've said before, means "to think differently after". It means that people were expected to undergo a change of mind and a change of behaviour. When Jesus said "Repent", he wasn't just asking for people to feel badly for their wrong-doings. He was asking them to make a deep, inward change, a radical change toward God. We have the benefit of having the whole of Jesus's message available to us in the gospel and we know that when Jesus said

“Repent”, he meant that it wasn’t good enough to show all of the expected outward signs of piety, it wasn’t good enough to follow every letter of the law – especially when using that law for personal gain or to avoid doing good. That’s why Jesus made a point of healing on the Sabbath. The law forbids work on the Sabbath. “Was it work to do good?” he asked the Pharisees. He wanted to show the people that outward acts of piety and adherence to the laws don’t cut it on their own. People must have a deep and abiding love for God in their hearts that dictates their behaviour. Repent: change your mind; change your behaviour – wholly embrace God with heart, mind, and soul.

That brings us to Jesus’s next instruction. “Follow me”. What did Jesus mean when he said to people, “Follow me”? He wanted them to believe in him, he wanted people to hear his words, and most importantly, he wanted people to do what he was teaching. You can see how “repent” and “follow me” work hand-in-hand. He wanted them to repent and truly mean it – to change their way of thinking and let their love for God shine through in their actions. In fact, shortly after this episode, Jesus says to his followers, “Let your light so shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” Jesus was teaching others to be like him – to be in loving, harmonious relationship with each other and with God – to see the kingdom of God. Jesus was the great light to a people sitting in darkness but his followers are to be that light to others as well.

Jesus gives a reason for why he suddenly embarks on his mission: the kingdom of God is near. The kingdom is near – this has two meanings to it. First, the kingdom is near in terms of time. God rules all creation and is drawing that creation ever closer to perfection. With the arrival of Jesus, the time of this coming perfection has drawn closer. The kingdom is near also means that the perfection of God’s kingdom is

found in Jesus himself, he carries the kingdom, and he is near to the people – God made flesh, walking among us, bringing the kingdom.

Repent. Follow me. And who does he say this to? To a bunch of fishermen – average everyday Joe’s doing their average, everyday jobs. Not the super-elite, super-brainy “who’s who” of 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish society (remember, those people didn’t ‘get it’). He called ordinary people – like us – to do something extraordinary...to repent and follow him.

They were hardworking fishermen and he said to them that he would make them “fish for people”. Jesus didn’t say, “Follow me, I’m going to make you evangelists” or “Follow me, I’m going to turn you into missionaries”. No, he told fishermen that they were going to fish. In other words, Jesus was saying to them, “You already have the knowledge and ability you need to be my followers. Keep doing what you’re doing but do it for me.” **We** already have what it takes to be a follower of Christ. God has given us, each one of us, gifts that we may use to be the light of Christ in the world. Keep doing the good things you’re doing but, do them for Christ. So many people hear themselves being called “disciples” and have one of two common reactions...The first reaction is to think, “No, I’m not - I’m not qualified – I’m not a theologian”. The thought of being a disciple scares them because they immediately think they don’t know enough. The second reaction to being called a disciple is, “No – I’m not. I don’t want to be one of those pushy people trying to shove religion down everyone’s throats.” Well, Jesus is telling us we already have what it takes. We don’t need a higher education – we are learning together, here, each week – and we can let people know about Jesus without being pushy.

I have shared this story with you before but let me refresh your memories. Back when I was a teacher – at Schumacher Public School – when all of the students had

left at the end of the day, the custodian came into my classroom like he always did to start his evening cleaning. He always said hi and chit-chatted a bit but this time he started telling me very personal health concerns that he and his wife were experiencing. I gave him the sympathetic listening ear that he wanted but, on the inside, I was wondering why on earth he was suddenly telling me all of this personal information. Then, at the end of the conversation, he said, “Thanks for listening. I knew you were someone I could talk to because I saw the Bible on your desk.” I had not opened my mouth and yet I’d announced myself as a follower of Christ and, for the custodian, that made me different.

We already have what it takes to be followers of Christ and we are followers of Christ. Keep doing the good things you are doing but, do it for Christ. The people who love to knit can knit slippers for people in hospital and shine the light of Christ. The bakers who bring cookies to church are shining the light of Christ. Your warm greeting, a friendly smile, comforting a friend, the can of food you give to the food bank, volunteer work of any sort – all of these things shine the light of Christ. When you do what you already know how to do and you do it for Christ, your light will shine, people will see your good works and glorify God. And with your light, will come understanding. Your light will be showing to the people around you the kingdom of God. Each and every one of us is a sign, witness, and foretaste of the kingdom of God. Each one of us carries the kingdom because each one of us carries Christ within us to show to the world.

There is one more important piece to being a follower of Christ that Matthew makes clear today. Being a follower, turning to God’s ways, is a choice – always a choice. Even Jesus is shown by Matthew to make choices. When his cousin, John, was arrested, Jesus made the choice to leave the area – since it was likely dangerous for

him there as well – and he went north, farther from Jerusalem but not back to his hometown of Nazareth. He went to the more populous city of Capernaum where there was a large fishing industry and where the Roman Empire was their main employer. In this we are shown that our choice is the crucially important choice of where we place our loyalty, our allegiance. When those fishermen ditched their nets and followed Jesus, they were ditching the empire. They were choosing the life of God's kingdom, leaving behind the socially and economically divided life of the empire and all of the problems those divides create.

Again, Mother Teresa has something to say about this: When you look at the inner workings of electrical things, she says, you often see small and big wires, new and old, cheap and expensive, all lined up. Until the current passes through them there will be no light. That wire is you and me, she continues. The current is God. We have the power to let the current pass through us, use us, produce the light of the world. Or we can refuse to be used and allow darkness to spread. (p.8 of *Mother Teresa Her Essential Wisdom*).

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” The light of Jesus revealed this kingdom to the people around him in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. Now, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, let us choose to let our light do the same.