

Preach the Kingdom

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[0 : 00] Thanks Clive and thank you for welcoming me back and letting me loose this morning. It's a delight to be back with you and also to celebrate Matilda's baptism as well.

So let's just take a few moments in prayer before we open God's word together. So loving God, we thank you for the opportunity to gather together this morning to worship you and may our hearts be open to your Holy Spirit to work in and through us as we hear your word.

In Christ's name we pray. Amen. So I have the privilege this morning of kicking off a new series, What Would Jesus Do? and the theme today is to preach the kingdom.

I'll come back to that a little bit later on, but at this point I want to set the scene as to what's going on in this passage. And this really is the launch pad for Jesus' mission, which is that the good news is to reach the ends of the earth.

A bit earlier on in Matthew, if you flick back, we learn about Jesus' descendants, his genealogy as it's called. He is conceived, he is born.

[1 : 17] Joseph takes the infant Jesus and Mary to Egypt as they escape Herod. And now he has grown into adulthood. He has been baptized by John, John the Baptist.

He has gone into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And now it's time to go. So Jesus is not some E.T. figure who drops from the sky and who does wonderful things.

But he is the new Adam. He brings a whole new humanity to birth. The true Israel of God, fulfilling the scriptures through the prophets.

And Matthew is saying here, here is the true son of God, who unlike Israel, would be faithful and obedient to him. So Jesus is back in Galilee in a place called Capernaum, which was a busy lake-sized town.

But moving to Galilee, there's something a bit deeper going on here than just a change of location. So Galilee was a despised part of Israel.

[2 : 22] It was far away from Jerusalem and the temple. It was riddled with Gentiles. Syria wasn't that far away to the northeast. And there are echoes here of some words from Deuteronomy chapter 10.

For the Lord your God is God of God and Lord of Lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing.

And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt. So Jesus' mission was to go to the Galilee of the Gentiles, as Matthew quotes from the prophet Isaiah in our reading, to reach the ends of the earth.

The outcasts, those who were despised. And this was God's mission for Israel. And by launching Jesus' earthly ministry from Galilee, Jesus here is anticipating what would come in the future.

That the gospel, the good news, will reach the ends of the earth. So that's my first point, that the good news will reach the ends of the earth.

[3 : 45] That is Jesus' mission. My second point is that Jesus challenges us to be disciples and not just followers in a crowd.

In the verse just after the end of our reading, Matthew refers to the crowds that follow Jesus as his fame spread.

And we see these crowds appearing again and again throughout the gospel. So they appear at the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus was healing, when he was teaching through parables, and as he entered Jerusalem on a donkey.

They were thinking that he was going to be a messianic warrior who would overthrow the Roman rule at that time. But it was also the crowd at the end of the gospel in Matthew 27, when Jesus was on trial before Pilate, who called for Barabbas, a well-known prisoner, murderer, and thug, to be released instead.

And when Pilate asked what should be done with Jesus, they shouted, crucify, crucify. So Jesus had a lot of followers in a crowd who all ended up deserting him, but not that many disciples.

[5 : 10] Being a disciple means to know and live out that good news. We are witnesses to that good news, to be beacons of the light of Christ shining to the ends of the earth.

So discipleship is actually costly, and it's costly in three dimensions. It's costly culturally, socially, and economically.

When we follow someone, it could be someone on Instagram or TikTok, if that's your sort of thing, a particular commentator or journalist or football team that you support.

It's all on our terms. We can dip in and out. But being a disciple takes all of us. We are to take up our cross, as Jesus says.

We are to follow him. It's part of who we are. It's our identity. Paul talks about in his letters about living in Christ. And this is costly.

[6 : 15] It was costly for the disciples. Jesus was calling them to a radical discipleship that would cost them everything, and for some of them, their lives.

There was probably a bit more background to what was going on in the story, or the gospel, as Matthew puts it. It seems like Jesus rocks up and just calls them off out of the blue, and they respond without let or hindrance.

But this probably would have been over a longer period of time. Jesus would have known them. He was a skilled tradesman. And while in his 20s, Jesus of Nazareth would have likely been in that area.

He would have been a known figure. But this call was still challenging. It would, yes, it was culturally surprising.

What's slightly unusual about Jesus' approach compared to other rabbis is that if you were a keen student, student of the law, you would approach a rabbi and ask him to be his apprentice.

[7 : 25] Not Jesus. He chose them. And not just students of the law, but rather working men, tradesmen, small business people, and stirs up their gifts and uses their skills and their profession as a metaphor to what discipleship means.

Jesus calls fishermen so that they may be fishers of people. Jesus is saying that you will be the ones who will help me gather Israel back into repentance, faith, and obedience.

So it's culturally challenging, economically costly as well. Fishermen were not the poorest of the poor. In Mark's account, they had hired servants.

The brothers would have likely been part of some business consortium probably. And they were to leave all of that and rather have others dependent on them.

They would be dependent themselves. Jesus called them to go into people's homes. They probably would have been sleeping rough as they were traveling. It was socially scandalous as well.

[8 : 45] In verse 22, after Jesus called James and John, they left their father. And this would have been a significant and socially offensive thing to do.

And they would have been away from home for long periods of time. And the point here is not that Jesus is anti-family, but that the kingdom of God is the ultimate priority, which can often be out of sync to what we want or our families want.

So following Jesus as part of a crowd costs nothing. But following Jesus as a disciple is costly.

And this is really challenging. You may have felt this when God calls you to do something or to not do something, particularly when it goes against the grain of what the world sees as important.

And the disciples felt this too when Peter exclaimed to Jesus in Matthew chapter 19, verse 27. He says, We have left everything to follow you.

[9 : 53] What will there then be for us? But despite this cost, we enter into a relationship with Jesus who laid down his life for us, whose sacrificial love means that we can have a share in his kingdom.

And he calls us as disciples to share that good news, to play our part in his mission that will reach the ends of the earth. So that's my second point, is to follow Jesus as a disciple, not just as part of a crowd.

But to be a disciple, we have to preach the kingdom. And what does that mean here today in the West, here in Clevedon, where it could be argued that being a Christian is culturally unsurprising.

Some people may think that we're a bit weird, but not a big problem. It's culturally assimilated and co-opted into the dominant culture. It's economically unthreatening.

And in most places, it's socially acceptable. But you may like to have a think about how many people in the settings that you are in, your work colleagues, your friends, maybe even your family, who know that you are a Christian and a disciple of Christ.

[11 : 22] I'm ashamed to admit that in my previous job, before I went into ordination training, I would say at least a third of my colleagues didn't know that I was a Christian until I told them why I was leaving.

And I found a couple of people saying, oh, I'm a Christian as well. Maybe there's something in us that is a bit embarrassed to share our faith, or even just to say, I went to church on Sunday.

Maybe we're afraid of people making assumptions about us. or that it's convenient to compartmentalise work life and friends and church life and friends.

But we are all people in this building and out in the world who are loved by God and who God is longing to see reconciled to himself.

That he gave his one and only son, Jesus Christ, to die on the cross for us, that those who believe in him may not perish, but have eternal life.

[12 : 27] And Jesus proclaims a very bold message in our reading. Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near. To repent means to turn to Christ and to turn away from sin that separates ourselves from him.

And this is a very bold message. It's a message that's disruptive. The gospel is often referred to as being offensive because it requires us to do something.

It requires us to make that change, to turn to him. It's an offensive message to the way of this world. But it's also a message of hope.

The kingdom of heaven is near. And we are called to share this message. After Jesus' resurrection in Matthew's gospel in chapter 28, he gives us the great commission.

He tells the disciples, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. And we, as the church, as we learned this morning, as the body of Christ, all have a part to play in this.

[13 : 42] we are to baptize. We are to make disciples. We should be disciple-making disciples. And this is quite daunting, especially when we have seen evangelism done quite aggressively.

I don't know if you've ever walked through Speaker's Corner in Hyde Park. You'll probably know what I'm on about. Or in some professions, like especially the care profession or in schools, where we need to be really careful how we talk about our faith when there is a vulnerability to abuse power.

I want to draw your attention to a book I often refer to on evangelism. You may have come across it. It's by a chap called Sam Chan who is an Australian evangelist.

And he's titled this book How to Talk About Jesus Without Being That Guy. And when it comes to evangelism, telling people about Jesus, he talks about a lifestyle change rather than a one-off event.

He makes the comparison to a New Year's resolution when you're trying to get fit. You know, you know the drill. You set up a gym membership and you drill yourself to get out of bed at five in the morning and you go for a run.

[15 : 05] And by the 7th of January it's too much and you give up. And the same process will repeat itself year after year. And that's because it's yet another activity to cram into an already busy life.

And he says fitness is a lifestyle change not a one-off event. And it's the same with evangelism about telling people about Jesus. It's not a one-off event.

We need to live as disciples. And one of the suggestions that Sam Chan makes is breaking that compartmentalization, if that's a word, of church and non-church groups of people we know who are Christians and people who aren't.

A practical suggestion that he makes could be to invite people here on a Sunday morning or to bring people into your social gatherings with other Christians where that's appropriate.

Where people can come together and the good news of Christ can be made known. Because one of the ways that many people come to know Christ is through community with others.

[16 : 18] Where we pray for one another, where we encourage one another, and where we learn from one another. And that also goes back to what we were talking about this morning when we bring people up in the faith.

When we baptised Matilda this morning, we promised and affirmed that we will maintain the common life of worship and service, that Matilda and all children among us may grow in grace and in the knowledge and love of God and of his Son, Jesus Christ.

So we often have these two separate universes and we need to merge them. We need to live as disciples across the two. And that's why when Jesus went down with tax collectors and sinners in Matthew chapter nine, the Pharisees saw him doing this and they asked, why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?

And Jesus responds by saying, it's not the healthy who need a doctor, but those who are ill. The interpretation of this is that Jesus needs to be with them in order that they would know who he is, that they may repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near.

But also, if Jesus wasn't going to do that, no one else was, and we have that same call today as disciples to create communities in which the love of God, the good news of Jesus Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit may be made known.

[18 : 04] So Jesus launches his ministry. His mission is to reach the ends of the earth and he calls disciples to make disciples and that also applies to us too and that is costly.

We are to be followers of him and not part of a crowd. But it means that all people may know the love of God which we know today.

and to do that, to be a disciple, we need to preach the kingdom. We need to create those communities where people may come to know him.

We are witnesses of his kingdom and we are called to live that out so that others may know. So let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we are called to be your disciples.

[19 : 11] We are called to play our part in your mission. Help us, Lord, to follow your call and despite the cost, may you strengthen us, guide us and teach us to bring up one another in your love and to share the good news of your kingdom.

In Christ's name we pray. Amen.