

Matthew 4:12-25
Welcome to the Kingdom
Notes from a sermon preached at Christ Church Liverpool

How well do you think Christianity is doing?

If you had to give marks out of 10 for the advance of the gospel, the good news, the Christian message in changing and transforming the world what would you give?

What mark would you award?

It's a survey, I think, that it might be quite interesting to conduct in a number of different types of churches. Or perhaps in different nations around the world.

Of course, inevitably, for all of us, our answer would be heavily coloured by personal experience. So maybe if each of us here gave a mark I imagine that someone who has seen a friend or family member become a Christian in the last year would be likely to be more optimistic than someone who has been struggling in a really difficult situation recently.

But there is another factor, apart from personal experience, that is absolutely fundamental in shaping our expectations of the progress of the Christian message in the world.

And that is our understanding of one of the key themes in Matthew's gospel; the kingdom of God.

How we view the nature and the power of the kingdom of God is vital to our understanding of the Christian life.

And it has to be said that this is one of those areas of life where Christians tend to extremes in the way they think.

On the one hand there are Christians and churches who are so confident in the power of the kingdom of heaven as it has arrived NOW that they give the impression that they can almost give the impression that there isn't really that much more to come in the future.

In some cases that's expressed in promises of health, wealth and happiness for all Christians now, all the time – if only we have sufficient faith.

In others cases it's seen in a constant, and usually entirely groundless, optimism that revival is just around the corner, that their neighbourhood, city or nation will turn to Christ at any minute.

Very often it's seen in an emphasis on the power, charisma or success of a church or Christian minister.

The kingdom is here, runs the not so subtle subtext, and we're the ones who are really cutting it. Our church or group will carry all before us in glorious power and progress.

Such thinking needs to be corrected, of course, by a return to the Bible's emphasis of the apparent weakness of God's means of salvation, the cross, the apparent feebleness of God's chosen messengers, the church, his people and, perhaps most of all, to the Bible's teaching that the full and final arrival of the Kingdom of God lies still in the future when Jesus returns.

The apostle Paul had to correct the church at Corinth for making just such errors in their thinking about the kingdom of God.

1 Corinthians 4:8-13. (p1146)

But there is another error that we can make in our thinking about the kingdom of God, in thinking about the progress and power of the gospel in the world. And it's an error that, I think, is much more likely and much more common in churches like ours.

- Churches which try hard not to be given to hype.
- Churches which work to resist the spirit of the age which tells us that all that counts is success.
- Churches which seek to recognise and help people live with the realities and struggles of life in a fallen world; not to gloss over those things or pretend that becoming a Christian will solve all your problems.

All of those, I believe, are good things to try to emphasise. But there is a danger there. A danger that we convey the impression that, in fact, the coming of Jesus, his cross and resurrection, doesn't really make that much difference. A danger that our expectation of the gospel message, of the kingdom of God, is an expectation of small things. A danger that, fundamentally, we don't expect God to **do** very much in our lives or the life of our church.

For us at Christ Church I believe that these are real dangers. In fact I'd say that despite the fact that God has undoubtedly and visibly blessed us as a church over the last 9 months our tendency will often be to expect too little from Jesus.

And that is a tendency that today's passage corrects.

For here in these verses of Matthew 4 we see the power of Jesus' kingdom displayed.

We saw last week that as he defeated the temptations of Satan Jesus has rejected power's corruption – but doesn't mean he isn't powerful. And it doesn't mean he isn't going to DO anything!

Let's get into passage which splits down into three sections:

1 Jesus' Kingdom dawns as he overcomes opposition bringing light in darkness (v12-17)

It must be said that it doesn't look like a promising start. John the Baptist, the last of the prophets who pointed people to the coming the the Christ, the Messiah, has not been gloriously received, but imprisoned, v12.

And the Messiah, the Son of God himself seems to retreat from Jerusalem, the city at the centre of the nation of Israel where you would expect a king to announce his reign, to Galilee, a real rural backwater. It's like someone retreating from Westminster or Whitehall to the Lake District. Not the kind of thing you'd do if you were going to exercise influence over a nation.

But what appears to be a defeat, a retreat, is, in reality, the dawning of the kingdom of King Jesus, the kingdom of heaven, exactly as God had predicted it through the prophet Isaiah 600 years earlier.

Isaiah 9 predicts the coming of a great king. One who will not only be called Wonderful Counsellor but also Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Isaiah prophesied the coming of a King whose government and reign would last forever; who would reign eternally on the throne of his Father David.

And in keeping with God's tendency to work amongst the poor, the despised and the lowly – those who were humble enough to see their need of his rescue – the King would come, Isaiah was told, not to the prosperous South but to the rural North.

*Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali (two of the tribes of ancient Israel),
The way to the sea, along the Jordan,
Galilee of the Gentiles –*

What appears to be a setback, as one of the main heralds of the Kingdom of Heaven is imprisoned, is part of God's sovereign plan, consciously fulfilled by King Jesus.

And as Jesus goes to this international region – Galilee was not a nation just of Jews (of Zebulun and Naphtali) but of Gentiles too – what is his mission?

To bring light in the darkness, life in the shadow of death, v16

Light to the darkness of confusion about the truth in a world of competing religious claims.

Light to the darkness of moral corruption as men and women reject the God who made them and invent their own self-centred standards.

Light to the darkness of sadness and isolation.

And, as the passage itself hints, most of all, light to the darkness of sickness and death itself.

Into these dark parts of life King Jesus has come to bring light. How?

By a message; a message that is exactly the same, word for word, as that brought by John the Baptist.

This messenger may be infinitely more powerful but his message is the same:

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near, v17

The light that dawns across the nations of the world is the message of Jesus Christ – repent, turn back to God, stop rebelling against him, for the kingdom of heaven is near.

God's rule is arriving, whether we like it or not.

The message of Jesus, the call to repentance in the face of the impending arrival of God's judgment and rule, will always be met with opposition.

John the Baptist knew that. Jesus knew that. But wherever the message of the arrival of the kingdom of heaven is proclaimed; light dawns.

The message of the gospel has the power to transform lives, communities, societies and nations.

Where people trust in the gospel of Jesus there dawns clarity over competing claims to religious truth as we come to see that Jesus IS the way the truth and the life.

There dawns new understanding over moral standards as people see that to live, under grace, by God's good laws is to become more and more the people we were made to be.

There dawns new hope in the face of isolation and loneliness and, where the family of the church functions as it should, new community, friendship and love.

Most of all there dawns new life as an eternity with God and his people in a new earth relegates the shadow of death to a passing cloud.

The gospel; *repent for the kingdom of heaven is near*, brings light in darkness.

Why not go home this lunchtime. Draw the curtains. Make your room dark. And then switch the lights on. What you'll discover is that the darkness is powerless. It cannot help but disappear. It can do nothing to resist. Where light dawns, darkness flees away.

Where Jesus' message is proclaimed, light dawns. We know there will be opposition. We know not everyone will respond to the light – for men love darkness rather than light. But we must be confident that Jesus' dawning kingdom brings light to people in darkness.

The gospel is not simply a nice idea for our friends who are basically OK but could do with something a little extra. It is powerful light for people living in darkness and death.

Where the message of Jesus is proclaimed – repent for the kingdom of heaven is near – light invades the lives of men women.

Be confident in the power of the gospel of Jesus.

2 Jesus' Kingdom grows as he powerfully calls followers (v18-22)

How surprised are you when people become Christians?

I used to think that I had an appropriate level of confidence in the power of the gospel message, the good news of Jesus' life, death

and resurrection that, by faith, can make us right with God.

But recently I've not been so sure that I do really believe that the message of Jesus is powerful. Because I'm so surprised every time someone becomes a Christian.

Now of course if we take seriously what Matthew has already told us we will be surprised when people trust in Jesus Christ. After all every human beings, lives in darkness. In the shadow of death. It is always a miracle that anybody should respond to God's grace and turn away from placing ourselves at the centre of our own life.

But if we read the Bible we should not be surprised that people respond to the words of Jesus in the gospel message. Because the words of Jesus are so powerful. That's what Matthew is trying to convey to us here.

We know from John's gospel that Jesus had met Peter, Andrew, James and John before.

"Come, follow me." were not the first words he had spoken to the.

And when you think about it that makes a lot of sense – after all it would be a bit odd to follow someone if you had no idea who he was or what he was about!

Matthew records this incident to emphasise the power of Jesus' words. When Jesus' calls people to follow him, guess what – they follow!

And what Jesus calls his followers to do is something higher and better than whatever they have been doing before. Normally of course that won't mean leaving whatever job or profession someone had before they became a Christian.

But it will mean a reorientation of the primary and fundamental goal of their lives to be fishers of men – to do what Jesus did. To bring his good news into the lives of people living in darkness.

And surely the expectation that Jesus brings here is that his followers will be successful in fishing for men and women.

I don't think Jesus is calling them to do something that cannot be done.

Rather he asks his followers to share with others the same powerful word that called us to follow Jesus.

If we look at our lives and see what it took for Jesus to bring people like us – people who are by nature rebels against God who reject his standards and choose to live so as to please ourselves...

...if we see how powerful the words must have been that brought light to our darkness it should come as no surprise to us that when we share the message of Jesus with other people some of them become Christians too.

Here in Matthew's account Jesus powerfully calls some slightly unexpected people to follow him – fishermen weren't generally the most religious or educated people. The New Testament says that the religious leaders of the day regarded Peter and John as "ordinary" men.

And perhaps in our experience too it will be the unexpected people amongst our friends and family that Jesus will call with his powerful word as we share the gospel message. But our expectation should be that people WILL respond to Jesus call. That as we run Christianity Explored if we invite our non-Christian friends people will become Christians. That as we share the gospel in our workplaces, halls of residence, families and social groups it will bear fruit.

Be confident in the power of the gospel of Jesus.

3 Jesus' Kingdom results in healing for all who follow him (v23-25)

What would you expect a good king or a good president to provide for his people?

If you went onto the streets of Baghdad this week when the Americans handed over political control of the nation to the Iraqis the answer would have been clear enough – security.

In Britain I guess we might expect our Prime Minister to deliver improvements in public services, lower crime and economic growth.

But what about King Jesus?

What can he be expected to provide for his people, for those who heed his call to repent and follow him?

When the prophet Isaiah predicted a great light, a dawning of new hope for the people, the major threat faced by Israel was that of regional military superpowers.

The might King, the wonderful counsellor, the Prince of Peace, who would come would bring freedom from such occupation.

Listen to these words from Isaiah 9:4-5:

*For as in the day of Midian's defeat,
You have shattered the yoke that burdens them,
The bar across their shoulders,
The rod of the oppressor.
Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood,
Will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire.*

The king would bring freedom from foreign oppression. But the kingdom that Jesus brings is far better...

Jesus, v23, with his powerful teaching, his awesome words brings not freedom from military occupation but from disease, sickness, demon possession, epilepsy and paralysis.

God's judgment on the wickedness of the Israelites, his sign to them that they needed to repent in preparation for the coming kingdom was invasion by foreign armies. And the Israelites needed a king to rescue them.

But far more fundamentally, from the very beginning of the Bible, God's judgment on the wickedness of all humanity, his sign to us that we need to repent in preparation for the coming kingdom is the curse of sickness and death.

As Jesus took his good news all around the region of Galilee in his miracles he showed that he had come to provide nothing less than perfection, healing, paradise for his people.

Throughout the New Testament, and through the history of the church, glimpses of the physical perfection of that kingdom show through as Jesus heals the sick, frees those oppressed by evil spirits and raises the dead.

Of course this is not a promise that every Christian will be healed here and now from all our diseases and illnesses – no more than v18-22 are a promise that everyone we present the gospel message to will become a Christian.

But it is a real demonstration, in history, of the power of the kingdom of heaven and its king – the Lord Jesus Christ.

Perhaps often, like me, you tend to think of Jesus' plan for your life as being about doing

some good and useful things in his service here and now, living a life that is, hopefully, godly and fruitful, and then after that something quite vague and ill-defined.

Well that is not what the kingdom of heaven is like. Jesus brings his kingdom into a wicked and rebellious world with power and authority. In his healing miracles he anticipates the perfection of the kingdom that is to come!

A kingdom for which we are prepared as we listen to his gospel message. As we listen to the good news that, despite our sin, we can be welcomed into the kingdom of heaven by placing our trust in Jesus Christ.

Be confident in the power of the gospel of Jesus.

The question that begs of course, is what sort of people are going to be welcomed into such a powerful kingdom?

The answer, shockingly, in chapter 5 is that this is a kingdom for the poor in spirit, the mourning, the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart, those who seek righteousness, the peacemakers and the persecuted.

And you can learn more about why that is in our housegroups over the next few weeks as we study the beatitudes in Matthew 5.

Be confident in the power of the gospel of Jesus.

Andrew Evans
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