

Matthew 4:12–17

¹² When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he withdrew to Galilee. ¹³ Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali— ¹⁴ to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah:

¹⁵ *“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.”*

¹⁷ From that time on Jesus began to preach, **“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”**

Reflection

John the Baptizer’s ministry role was to prepare the way for God’s new action within the people of Israel. His message was: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Matt 3:2). The people of Israel came out into the wilderness to hear John preach of this coming new action of God and as they were moved, they were baptized and renewed their commitment to God. Within this passage we learn that John’s ministry was closing. He had accomplished his mission. When Jesus came to John to be baptized in chapter 3 of Matthew’s Gospel, John recognized him as ‘the one’ and heard the heavenly voice of the Father (God) confirm Jesus’s identity. John’s arrest and eventual death is the signal that his ministry is at an end and Jesus’s is to begin.

As Jesus steps into the public eye, his actions are consistent with his rejections of the Satan’s temptations in chapter 4 of Matthew’s Gospel. He does not raise an army and march into the capital of Jerusalem. Instead, he retreats to a small town that is marked out by the presence of Gentiles (non-Jewish people; pagans). And, for those who are prepared for God’s new work, he indicates that he is the long hoped for light that would rescue Israel from foreign oppression and make peace with the Gentiles.

Jesus’s declaration uses the same words as John’s, but the meaning is deeper because of the one who speaks. Jesus is God’s (and Israel’s and the world’s) Messiah. The word ‘repent’ doesn’t mean ‘feel bad for personal sin’ (although sorrow for sin is appropriate). Instead, it means ‘turn around and go the other way.’ The kingdom of heaven (Matthew’s Jewish way of saying kingdom of God) is the rule or government of God (on earth as it is in heaven). Jesus’s call is for us to turn from all other rule (including sin’s rule) toward’s him and his rule because he is God’s anointed one who truly represent’s God’s character.

This is Ash Wednesday. It begins the lenten season, when we prepare ourselves through repentance to once again encounter the cross and resurrection of Jesus in the coming season of Easter. This day, this season, and the annual cycle of the Christian calendar reminds us that we are a people who stray. We have a tendency to go our own way and, it is a confession that our ways lead out of the kingdom. To be marked with an ashy cross is a resealing of our repentance and new determination to follow Jesus as his disciples.

Prayer

Lord, we confess that we have gone our own way and that way has led us away from you and your good life. Mark us out as your people, we pray, even as we determine to follow you a new. Thank you that you do not give up on us as we give up on you, but your grace comes to us again and again leading us to your cross and the new life of the resurrection. Amen.



Zondervan Atlas of the Bible; Carl G. Rasmussen