

# THE THIRD SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

January 22 & 23, 2011

“Come and Follow”

Matthew 4:12-25

The synoptic Gospels – that is, the Gospels according to Matthew, Mark and Luke – are remarkably similar in their account of Jesus’ first days of public ministry. The baptism of Jesus which we celebrated just two weeks ago and through which he was anointed with the Holy Spirit and with power was the beginning of that ministry. Following his baptism came the temptation in the wilderness which was the opening battle cry of the Savior in the war against Satan and which would, of course, ultimately climax in his final victory on the cross through his death and resurrection. In that temptation in the wilderness Jesus struggles with God’s and man’s age-old enemy over the meaning of his messianic ministry and the kingdom of God. It’s following that temptation that Jesus expands his ministry to the world – the world which he came to save.

In a kind of shorthand way all three synoptic Gospel writers including the writer of our text for today sum up all of Jesus’ public ministry in terms of preaching and teaching and healing and calling people to come and see, to come and follow. They summarize this ministry in Jesus’ own words, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near” and “Come, follow me.” As we move through this Epiphany season it would serve us well to take a closer look at those words today.

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.” Now repentance is more than just regret or remorse and it’s not simply feeling guilty. It’s not just a matter of clenched fists and a determined willpower to do better. In fact, it’s not even something we can do. Rather, it’s quite the opposite. It’s something God leads us to discover. It’s a discovery that there is, in fact, nothing that we can do – a realization that we are simply helpless before God. It’s really only that discovery, that realization, that can truly open us up to receive what Jesus has come to give. But how hard that is! We may not be perfect, we say, but we’re trying!

In a very real way then, Jesus’ ministry is the expression of God’s love for those who realize their helplessness before Him – people like the sick, the outcasts, the sinners. But those who are unwilling to see or admit their helplessness before God are not open to what God wants to give them. For them there is only indifference or pride or even anger. In the end, they are, among all people, the most to be pitied, for they don’t see or won’t admit their need.

But for those who repent, for those who by the power of the Holy Spirit discover and realize their helplessness, there comes a word of hope – “The kingdom of heaven is near.” Perhaps the impact of these words can be best understood as compared to a person who hears he or she only has six months to live but then, when all hope seems gone, is told, “it’s a miracle, you’re cured, you’re going to live!” That’s the way it is with the kingdom. It comes to those who realize their hopelessness and it says, “be of good cheer, your sins are forgiven you.” It is food for the hungry soul and drink for the thirsty spirit. It is life for those who are dead. And it is present

even now for those who repent and believe and come and follow Jesus through this life into the life to come.

To follow Jesus is not so much a physical thing, although it was for those in our text for today, as it is a spiritual thing. It's a desire to live out the hope that is ours in Christ day to day wherever we are and in whatever we're doing. Those first disciples realized their hopelessness but then saw the hope that was in Jesus and they were willing to follow him and to leave everything else behind. The rest of the Gospels as well as the entire book of Acts goes on to tell how they lived out that hope even in the face of persecution and suffering and death as they sought to share that hope with the whole world. For them following Christ was no sacrifice – it was the fulfillment of their hopes and dreams. It was an honor to follow.

And that's what it still is for all those who realize their hopelessness today and who are open to the hope of the promise of the kingdom of heaven that is in Christ Jesus. To follow Christ is no sacrifice because they know that whatever they leave behind is left behind because it is part of their helplessness. Their own will, their own determination, their own striving is part of their problem and not part of the solution. And so, to come and follow Christ and to leave all that would hold them back is the fulfillment of their hopes and dreams as well – an honor to live in Christ's name.

That's why those who follow Christ still cannot help but share the good news of the Gospel with everyone who will listen for they know that he continues to be the fulfillment of everyone's hopes and dreams to this very day.

It's said that a man walking along a narrow ledge on a mountain has only one chance to make it to his destination. He must not look back for he will lose his direction nor must he look down for he will lose his balance. Rather he must look onward and upward so that he may attain his goal.

Likewise, those of us who seek to follow Jesus, baptized into his name and continually tempted by Satan as to where our help and our hope lie, must not look backward at what was, nor downward at what is, but rather look onward and upward at what will be because of God's love for the helpless and the hopeless who not only repent and believe the promise of the kingdom but who also seek to live out that promise in their lives day to day trusting in Christ to lead them as they follow on.

May God bless us all to that end this coming week for Jesus' sake. Amen.