

## The Life of Jesus

### *Sermon 4: The Ministry of Jesus Begins*

Passages: Acts 19:1-7  
Matthew 4:12-25

Let's pray.

Last week, we looked at the ways that John the Baptist and Jesus were like twin brothers-- in so many ways, their ministries were incredibly similar.

This is important to remember as we turn to today's passage. For *even though we may know how unique Jesus' ministry was to that of John, **the civil authorities had no idea! They could only see the similarities!*** In their minds, John and Jesus were just another pair of **insurrectionists**, stirring up political instability amongst the simple-minded country folk of Galilee.

You see, at this very time in Israel, there were **numerous rebel activities** taking place, particularly in Galilee. According to the historian Josephus, this was due to the fact that King Herod the Great was now dead. Herod the Great (the evil King) had taxed the people heavily, causing many families to get so far into debt that they could no longer support themselves. Land acquisitions began to occur. Many of Galilee's villages were being threatened with disintegration. But **now that Herod the Great was dead** and his weaker son, Herod Antipas, was on the throne, many peasant communities throughout Galilee saw this as their opportunity to revolt. They attacked the royal fortresses and store-houses and "took back" the goods that had been seized and stored there. They even raided Roman baggage trains.

Of course, these local movements of political and social unrest only put Herod Antipas on greater alert. The more the peasants challenged Roman imperial order, the more the he (along with the Jerusalem high priesthood in some cases) took brutal, sometimes massive military action. Many of the local leaders were publicly decapitated or ceremonially executed in an attempt to teach the population a lesson. (As we shall see, one of them will be John the Baptist.)

Keep all this in mind as we read verse 12. Matthew writes; ***"Now when (Jesus) heard that John had been taken into custody, He withdrew into Galilee...and settled in Capernaum."***

**Why was John taken into custody?** Clearly, King Herod Agrippa felt *politically* threatened by his preaching! And even when Luke's Gospel tells us that John's imprisonment was because he had spoken out about the immoral behaviour of King Herod Agrippa in his decision to marry his brother's wife, if you read between the lines, you'll see that it wasn't the *moral challenge* that got John in strife! John was publicly criticising the King, and that was **an act of treason!** In the eyes of the government, John was a trouble-maker, deliberately stirring up discontent amongst the masses. That's why John needed to be silenced.

This sets the stage for what follows next. You see, in this opening verse of today's passage we read that, soon after John was thrown in prison, Jesus headed north, to Capernaum. (Take a moment to find Capernaum on the map.)

The reason for His move to the north is clear! As we've seen, **John and Jesus were like twin brothers!**

- Both men had been baptising people in the Jordan River;
- Both had been using language which condemned the rich and powerful;
- Both spoke openly about the coming of *another* Kingdom-- the *Kingdom of God!*

Surely, **it wouldn't be long before the authorities would start coming after Jesus!** It's no wonder why Jesus left Nazareth and moved north, to the quiet seaside town of Capernaum, on the northern side of the Sea of Galilee.

Now, in case you didn't know, Capernaum is almost 200 kms away from Jerusalem (about as far as Newcastle is from Sydney on the old Pacific Highway). In the ancient world of Israel, this was almost as far away from the political 'power structures' and influences of Jerusalem as you could get and still stay inside the national borders. In other words, Capernaum was a pretty safe spot where Jesus could quietly inaugurate His ministry.

**But there's another reason why Jesus went north to Capernaum.** This northern Galilean town had little contact with the Temple and with the religious teachers of Jerusalem. Because of this distance, the people weren't as easily brainwashed in the Pharisaic ways of understanding the OT Scriptures. Indeed, the people of Galilee were quite relaxed about keeping the Law of Moses. And with such a large Gentile population in the region, many of the Jews who lived here were open to the ideas of other religions.

And although this meant that their southern neighbours in Judea *looked down* on the Galileans as *uneducated* and *unsophisticated*, *corrupted* by Gentile culture and thinking, the fact is that **the people of Galilee were free**—free to read the Scriptures

anew...with open eyes and an open heart. They were free to question and to explore the very subjects that the Jews in Jerusalem were afraid to question and explore!

This seems to be the reason why, in verse 15, Matthew quotes from Isaiah 9—

<sup>15</sup> ***‘Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali,  
the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan,  
Galilee of the Gentiles –***

<sup>16</sup> ***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.’***

In citing this text from Isaiah, Matthew is excited by **the unique situation in which Jesus begins His ministry!** The light has come into the darkness! And here is a population who is free enough and willing enough to allow the light of the Son of God to shine! Indeed, it will be here, in Capernaum, where Jesus’ unique message about the Kingdom of Heaven will be openly received; the place where it will begin to gain momentum as a movement!

Indeed...look at **verses 18 to 22**. Matthew recounts the way that Jesus gathered His first disciples. (read)

As you heard, the movement started with just two simple fishermen—brothers named Peter and Andrew. Not long after, two more brothers, James and John (the sons of Zebedee), also fishermen, join the ranks of Jesus’ followers.

But, **why** did they follow Him? Why did they leave their occupations and their families to follow this preacher?

The only way to understand it is to (once again) consider **the political situation** that was going on in Galilee at this time. The peasants of Galilee were sick and tired of being oppressed by heavy taxes. They longed for justice. They were keen to see the political stranglehold of Rome finally overthrown. As such, many were tempted to join **any** local rebel movement that would fight for their land and their community.

Peter, Andrew, James and John were no exceptions! And so, when Jesus came along and spoke the language of *revolution*, they were immediately interested.

But (and this is extremely important to understand), ***something else was happening inside of them***. *The Holy Spirit was giving them eyes to see and ears to hear—to*

discern the fact that **the revolution that Jesus was initiating was going to be remarkably different to all those other movements!**

In what ways would it be different?

**1. It would be a movement of repentant non-violence.**

As we read in verse 17, Jesus' catch-cry was simple, yet provocative: **"Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near."** You see, to "repent" (*metanoia*) literally means, "to turn around". According to the commentator, Bishop NT Wright, Jesus was telling these fishermen of Capernaum that *all the other revolutionary movements going on in their region were going in the wrong direction*, for they all **using violence as a means of gaining power**. This, in Jesus' mind, was a backward step. (Indeed, this was the major lesson He learned during His temptation in the wilderness (recorded in the first half of this chapter. If you remember, on two out of three occasions, Satan tried to tempt Jesus to use *physical power* to achieve glory!) Now, in Capernaum, Jesus takes that lesson one step further. He must *continue* to resist this same temptation to usher in the Kingdom of Heaven through violent means.

The young men of Galilee were just like the young drunkards in Kings Cross—they were eager to get into a fight with Rome! And that's exactly why Jesus was calling them to **repent**—to, literally, turn around; to stop rushing towards the cliff edge of violent revolution, and instead to go the other way; towards God's kingdom of light, and peace, and healing, and forgiveness. In Jesus' mind, those who fight darkness with darkness (those who fight and kill in order to put an end to fighting and killing) were falling into one of Satan's greatest traps!

Indeed, if Isaiah's words were ever going to come true for Israel, her people would need to become *light* in the darkness; they would need to *shine* with the heavenly glory of *truth, humility, patience and love*. For these are the only weapons that will defeat Satan! That's why Jesus called the people of Israel to **repent**—to turn around--and follow *God's way* in dealing with the occupying forces of Rome. Of course, in the end, to follow *God's way of truth, humility, patience and love* would inevitably take Jesus to the cross! But wasn't that the only way to bring in the Kingdom of Heaven?

Stop and think! Consider all the violent revolutions that are occurring in our world today—in Egypt, Syria, Thailand, South Sudan, the Central African Republic, the Ukraine... **In all these places, men think that violence is the only solution**. But is it?

As Christians, we must believe that **Jesus' message of repentance is just as urgent today** as it was in first century Galilee! Not only must we, like the first disciples, choose to turn away from violence, coup d'états and forced political overthrows..., *but we must call the world to repent as well!* Violence is not the way forward!

If, by chance, you are one of those people who thinks that peaceful solutions are impossible, let me remind you that, only a few weeks ago, we mourned the death of that great South African statesman, **Nelson Mandela**. Just this past week, Americans celebrated **Martin Luther King** day. What connects these two great men is the way they achieved so much in terms of justice and liberation, *not through force or violence or human strength*, but through **humility and peace**. **Both men took their cues from Jesus!**

We must open our eyes! To use violence to end violence has, more often than not, devastating consequences. As we look at what remains of **Iraq** and **Afghanistan**, it makes me wonder what would have happened if the Coalition forces followed the advice of Jesus *and repented* instead of dropping their bombs? What would have happened if, instead of spending billions of dollars on the machinery of **war**, they spent that same amount of money on the machinery of **peace**—building schools and wells and bridges and roads... building up these nations with goodwill, as well as building relationships between the people of the West and the East. How different the world would be today!

For if these peaceful means had been used (and succeeded) in Iraq and Afghanistan, I can even imagine that the current uprisings in Egypt, Syria, Thailand, South Sudan, the Central African Republic and the Ukraine would all have been resolved. Why? Because the downtrodden people of these countries would have turned to the successful Peacemakers of other trouble spots, seeking their help in resolving their national dilemmas!

Friends, Jesus' call is to *repent*—to turn away from all the old solutions of war and violence to fix our problems. To repent means to open ourselves to God's solution found in Jesus, the Prince of Peace!

**Jesus' revolution began (it always begins) with repentance...turning away from violence!**

## **2. Jesus' revolution would spread through the visible evidence of *Shalom*.**

Take a moment to read the last 3 verses of today's passage. (read on screen)

Now, tell me, what do you see in these verses? To the Hebrew mind, Matthew is talking here about the spread of **Shalom**. **Shalom** means far more than *an end to violence*. **Shalom** includes health, and wholeness, and the fullness of life. **Shalom** is what Adam and Eve had in the Garden of Eden before the Fall. And it's something that the OT prophets often spoke about... something they knew was coming in the future... but which they were never able to experience.

In Jesus, however, God's **shalom** has not only come to earth but *it has begun to spread*. As Jesus moves throughout Galilee, demons are cast out, the sick are healed, and the dead are raised.

And, of course, you can expect what happens next! As this news of *Shalom* spreads to Syria in the north, the Decapolis in the east and Judea in the south, people come from far and wide, bringing their mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, aunts and uncles to Jesus for healing and deliverance.

**Shalom** is not as side-show to the Gospel. **This is the Gospel**. **Shalom** is the tangible and visible fruit of the salvation which Jesus came to establish on this earth—a salvation in which we are set free (not only spiritually, but emotionally, psychologically and physically as well)-- free from everything that once corrupted and destroyed us and our world.

This is why the people came to Jesus--not just for healing and deliverance from their physical ailments-- but because they could see the in-breaking of **Shalom**; they could see that, in Jesus, ***"the Kingdom of Heaven had come near"***.

So, let me ask you: Is the same thing true, today? I mean, Is the Kingdom of Heaven still near, today? And if it is, should we expect to see the in-breaking of **Shalom** in our day and age?

The answer to both questions is, of course, **"Yes!"** The One who said, ***"I will never leave you nor forsake you"*** is still here-- and if He is here, then His Kingdom is surely here as well! That's why Jesus told His disciples, ***"Truly... he who believes in Me, the works that I do he shall do also; and greater works than these shall he do because I go to the Father."***

Of course, the “*greater works*” that Jesus was speaking about would never be limited to physical healings and exorcisms. As I said, *Shalom* goes far wider and deeper than this. Although it includes these things, *shalom* must also be seen in transformed minds and hearts, and changed lives. *Shalom* is seen in communities, like ours, which have a new appreciation for *life*, and who have overcome the age-old fear of *death*. *Shalom* is seen in each person who has experienced liberation from selfishness and pride. It is seen in those who have found freedom from the addictions that have held them captive for so long. *Shalom* is seen in all those who walk with a new *expectancy* of seeing God provide and meet you wherever you are...in whatever state you are in.

This is what it means to live in *Shalom*. Indeed, this is what Jesus was talking about when he said, “***The Kingdom of Heaven is near.***”

But, of course, (according to today’s passage) the most important thing that Matthew wants us to understand about the in-breaking of *Shalom* in Jesus’ ministry was *the way that it attracted the whole world to Him!* Obviously, people had been longing to see the visible and tangible fruit of the Kingdom of Heaven. Rumours about its arrival drew people from near and far to seek Jesus.

And I believe these same rumours continue today! This is what continues to draw people to Jesus in our own day! This is what drew me...and you!

That’s why my prayer is that we may always be a channel for Jesus in this place...that the fruit of the Kingdom of Heaven...the *Shalom* of God... might be so visible in our midst that people will come, drawn to the Jesus who lives in our midst!

Will you pray for this as well?

Let’s pray.