

## Our Kingdom

January 22, 2023

Matthew 4:12-23

When you hear the word “kingdom,” what comes to mind? As I reflected on this question, I remembered a six-year-old me, already planning for my future where I wanted to be a king. The computer my family had at the house had a castle simulator on it, and I played on that simulator, designing my ideal castle. I wanted my kingdom to be perfect. Granted, I also thought that kings were just fabulously wealthy people who got to boss people around all day. Little did I know I could have become a CEO and basically lived that same lifestyle. Still, when we hear this word “kingdom,” we often make the same mistake my six-year-old self made, and the same mistake made when we hear other words like “nation,” “household,” or “church.” Often, we hear these words, and we think about the geographical location, the walls and rooves, the physical features it possesses. It’s only as a second thought that we think of the people within it. It is this latter definition that we need to bear in mind when we hear this reading for today.

So, Jesus is beginning his ministry, proclaiming that “the kingdom of God has drawn near.” Just what does that mean though? We hear that it has “drawn near,” and the common interpretation is that it is close at hand. It is approaching. It was far off physically, beyond space and time, but no more. It was far off in the distant future, beyond any of our lifetimes, but no more. No, now it’s right here, right now. This glorious kingdom, a place where all are welcome and help one another, where Death has lost its sting, where Sin has lost its power, and the people that bring it to fruition, it has arrived at long last. However, at this point, it is not a people that make it up, but just one person: Jesus. Thus, to build up this kingdom, to bring it to fruition and make it more real in the present, he invites all people, Jew and Gentile alike, to be a part of this kingdom with two different commands in the reading.

The first command that we see Jesus issuing is a single word: “Repent.” However, much like the word “kingdom,” this imperative, “repent,” is often misunderstood, mostly due to it not being fleshed out enough. We hear this word, and our mind immediately jumps to “salvation.” We must turn away from sinfulness so that, when we die, we will be allowed into Heaven. There however is more to repentance than just this. One’s repentance has very real implications in this very second. The Kingdom of God is modeled as much by Jesus as by us, for it is a life with God. By repenting, turning away from godlessness and lawlessness, we not only see the light in the darkness, but we are that light for others. We not only have hope and love, but we share that hope and love with those who need it most. This Kingdom, where all are equal and eat their fill, where there is no more pain, it’s not just a far-off dream, but can be a reality here, on earth, in the present, through the Church. To repent is not only to turn away from sinfulness that we might live with God in the afterlife, but that we might live with God in the present, modeling that life for others. However, turning away from sinfulness is not enough. To turn away from something says nothing for what we must do after. Hence the reason Jesus issues a second command, this time to four fishermen: follow.

Now, again, we hear this word, spoken to the fishermen. By following Jesus, they turn away from their lives as fishermen to travel with him. They “repent” in the literal sense of the word. However, Jesus is calling them to be more than just travel companions. Here, Jesus calls

them also to “follow in his footsteps,” to “follow his lead;” in other words, to imitate him. As Jesus does, they are to do. The messages Jesus speaks to others, they also are to speak. The love Jesus has in his heart, even for those who hate and revile him, they also are to have and to share. In following him, they turn away from obligations to family and society. They turn away from concerns for their financial well-being. In so doing, they take on for themselves Jesus’ lifestyle, a lifestyle that embodies the Kingdom for all. By that same token, just as Jesus is calling to “repent” and “follow,” so too are they now charged with doing the same. Even after Jesus has died, risen, and ascended, they carry on this mission, calling out to all persons to “repent” and “follow,” embodying that same Kingdom for all the world. Through their words, their actions, they display how wonderful the Kingdom, and therein a life with God, can be, calling others to join them in this Kingdom.

Thus, this calling to “repent” and “follow” is not just issued by Jesus to a single group, but rather to us in the present as well. It is not issued just by Jesus, but by those that followed him, their followers, and those who followed them. On and on down the generations, this call from Jesus echoes through the words and actions of every Christian that has ever been, even us. We are the Kingdom here and now, a full display of what benefits lie in store for those who choose to obey our callings to “repent” and “follow.” Just as the Church or our nation are not just physical locations, but rather a people, so too is the Kingdom of God. We are that Kingdom for all the world. Jesus is the cornerstone, and every person since who has not only heard but obeyed these commands are further stones building up this Kingdom. We are the light in a darkened world, the peacemakers and unifiers in a world divided, the dreamers and the lovers in a world where hatred has hopelessly run rampant. Through our words and actions, we display not only what it can be, but what it is, and therein echo those commands, “repent,” “follow,” down through the generations. So, I ask: How is Jesus calling out to our world to “repent” and “follow” through you?