



Matthew 4:12

12 When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he withdrew to Galilee.

Let's begin today with a bit of background about Jesus' ministry. Jesus' public ministry lasted for three years. Traditionally people have divided it into thirds. A year of relative obscurity, a year of popularity, and a year of increasing rejection and hostility leading up to his death. Between Matthew 4 verse 11 and

today's passage Matthew 4 verse 12 a year has passed. This is the year of relative obscurity. Not much is said about it in Matthew, Mark or Luke – which are similar in their accounts of Jesus' life. The fourth gospel however, John (written by the disciple John, not John the Baptist), is very different to the other three. And in the first four chapters of John's gospel we can fill in some of the things that Jesus got up to in the first year of his ministry, in this year of relative obscurity.

John tells us that before he returned to Galilee as we read in today's passage, Jesus met and called the first of his disciples. He turned water into wine at Cana, lived for a little while in Capernaum, and then he returned to Jerusalem for an early Passover festival (an annual Jewish religious festival). In Jerusalem he drove the money changers from the temple

and talked to a Jewish leader name Nicodemus. He then taught in the Judean countryside, and had his famous encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well on his way north again.

So it's clear from the gospel of John that Jesus' ministry did overlap with John the Baptist's ministry but perhaps Matthew, Mark and Luke here want to emphasize that for a full year John's ministry was drawing huge crowds, and while John was at it, Jesus remained in relative obscurity. It's almost like John's departure is the cue for Jesus to step up and begin his ministry in earnest. In Matthew 4:17 we see that shortly after this moment Jesus starts preaching, continuing John's call, preaching like John did, saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.' John has started a religious revival, thousands of devout Jews have come to hear

him preach and have been cut to the heart, turning back to God in repentance. They've been baptised by him and told to wait for the coming of one greater than him. And so after one year of hugely successful ministry John the Baptist has prepared the way for Jesus, and now Jesus comes onto the scene at the highpoint of this exciting revival movement that John has launched.

Only John has just been arrested. He's been arrested and thrown into prison by the Romans. You'll remember that he was a fearless preacher. Do you remember how he used to preach, he didn't care who he was addressing, they were all the same in his eyes; all sinners in urgent need of repentance. Do you remember his preaching from Matthew chapter 3? 'You brood of vipers,' 'even now the axe is laid at the root of the trees,' 'the chaff will burn

with unquenchable fire'. No one was spared - soldiers, tax collectors, the Pharisees and Sadducees (the religious leaders), even King Herod Antipas himself. Which proved his undoing, you see John had criticised King Herod for breaking the Old Testament law by marrying his brother's wife. And so Herod Antipas, under pressure from his wife as we'll see later in Matthew 14, had John thrown into prison. Shortly after he had him killed.

So we read today's passage with a sense of foreboding. John's been thrown in prison, the religious revival appears to be in disarray, and Jesus withdraws to Galilee. Remember he'd come from Galilee to the Judean countryside and now he withdraws to Galilee. Herod the Great, Herod Antipas' father had tried to kill Jesus when he was a toddler, and now, like father like son, Herod Antipas is about to do

away with John the Baptist – which can't bode well for the true king of the Jews, the one that John the Baptist is making all this fuss about. So Jesus withdraws from the region and heads back to Galilee.

John came preaching 'Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near,' and they threw him in prison, and killed him shortly after. Soon Jesus would start preaching, 'Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near,' and he too would go on to meet the same fate as John. Which reminds us, doesn't it, of the nature of the Christian message? It's offensive, it divides people. Some people fall on their knees in repentance and faith while others would sooner kill you. And yet our message is so urgent and so important that Christians throughout the centuries have taken this great risk, for their love of God and their love of neighbour, and

the gospel has cost many of them their lives.

None more so than missionaries – people who leave the comforts of home and take the gospel to faraway places so that people who've never heard the gospel might be saved. Missionaries like Jim and Elizabeth Elliot. Jim Elliot took Jesus' call seriously when Jesus says right at the end of the book of Matthew to take the gospel to all nations, so Jim took it to a tribe in Ecuador, one of the most dangerous people groups in the world at the time. He was killed, along with four other Christians as they approached the tribe – they didn't even have the opportunity to open their mouths. Jim's death made headlines around the world but this was only the beginning. Two years later Elizabeth Elliot, Jim's wife, went to live amongst the people that had killed her husband. Progressively, through God's amazing

work, many of them became Christians and the world watched on in shock as the tribe was utterly transformed by the gospel.

This is how the gospel has been handed down throughout history and so dramatically changed the world. First John died for it, and then Jesus, and then likely all of the Jesus' disciples except for one – all martyred for their faith. And the gospel has spread like wildfire down through the centuries with many Christians only too willing to pay the ultimate price so that the good news of Jesus could reach as many people as possible.

Which gives us much to think about today, especially if we live in the relative comfort and safety of the Western world. It may shock you to hear that more people are dying for their Christian faith today than at any other point

in history. Perhaps take some time to reflect over the price that John the Baptist paid, and the price that Jesus paid, and the price that countless others have paid and continue to pay as the gospel goes out to all the nations. What cost for the gospel to be heard by us? What can we be doing today to show our solidarity with our Christian brothers and sisters who are dying today for their faith? For our faith?

Think about this for a moment and then pray for them. Pray that God would deliver them from evil in this their time of need, and pray that God might open up your heart and mine to support them in anyway we can.

I'll leave you today with some words from Jim Elliot's diary. 'He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot

lose.'