



Matthew 4:17

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

In a few days times we’re going to have a look at the greatest of Jesus’ sermons. A sermon which is universally recognised as one of the greatest speeches of all time. It’s known as the Sermon on the Mount and we find it in Matthew chapters 5 to 7. We’re going to spend 10 weeks looking at it, 60 talks, and honestly

there's so much in it we could probably do many more. But today Matthew has chosen to summarise the Sermon on the Mount, and in fact all of Jesus' preaching for us, in one sentence.

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

And what immediately strikes us about this sentence is that is exactly what John the Baptist was preaching. Jesus is proclaiming in the north the same message that has just been silenced in the south. According to Jesus John was the greatest prophet to ever live, and John came preaching ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.’ And now the Son of God, the Saviour of the world comes preaching and the summary of his preaching is the same, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of

heaven is near.' Matthew is making it very clear to us that this message is extremely important and so in today's talk we're going to look at it closely.

But first, linking yesterday's passage to our passage today, yesterday we saw that beautiful image of a new light dawning. The new light that is dawning is the kingdom of heaven coming near. In Jesus the kingdom of heaven is dawning, and in keeping with this image, when Jesus' work is completed the kingdom of heaven will be steadily rising in the sky, and when he returns at his Second Coming it will be blazing overhead in all its glory. And on that day the bible teaches us that some will be hiding from its exposing light in caves and behind rocks and in holes in the ground and others will be standing outside arms raised heavenwards waiting to receive it. But

for now, Jesus preaches that the kingdom of heaven is drawing near.

So what is it and how do we receive it? What is the kingdom of heaven and how do we prepare for it, how can we become part of it?

Firstly, let's define the kingdom of heaven. That's the term Matthew uses. All the other gospel writers refer to it as the kingdom of God. Remember that Matthew is mainly writing to a Jewish audience, and Jews in those times highly revered God's name, they thought his name was so holy, that they wouldn't even write it down or say it aloud. Instead they'd use titles like Lord. So instead of writing kingdom of God, out of respect to his audience, Matthew instead uses kingdom of heaven (except on one or two occasions). But what is it? Well the kingdom of heav-

en is the fulfilment of many strands of Old Testament prophecies. The Old Testament speaks about it as a time when God would become king, God himself would come and rule the world, not just the Jewish nation but the whole earth. And God's kingdom would bring transformation at many levels. Transformation of the human person; we would be given a new heart and a new spirit. Transformation of human society; Israel would be restored to the Promised Land, cities would be rebuilt, and God's people again would become witnesses to the nations. Even nature itself would be transformed. Under God's rule perfect justice would reign, and there would be no more death or mourning or crying or pain because the old order of things has passed away.

Another way of thinking about God's king-

dom is this. The whole world is God's but because of sin the world has gone astray, it's gone off track. But one day soon God is going to return, and rule over it himself, and set everything right again. This is incredibly good news because it means that sin and death and all the troubles and injustice that we face in this world are coming to an end. However, every single one of us, to some degree, are responsible for the wrong in our world and so it is also very serious news. It's news that demands a response, a change of life, in case we find ourselves caught up on the wrong side of things. We want to be waiting for God with open arms, not hiding from him in our guilt and terrified of his judgement to come.

Which brings us to how to respond. The kingdom of heaven is near so how do we respond? Jesus' answer is to repent. But what does re-

pent mean? Now the word repent is one of those words that is often misunderstood. A lot of people think that repent means to be perpetually down on yourself, to always be feeling bad about yourself. But that's not what it means. How you feel about yourself isn't really the important thing here, it's what you do that matters. To repent, means to 'change direction,' to 'turn around and go the other way, or 'to stop what you're doing and do the opposite instead.' That's what repentance is. Now sure, this might come about by feeling truly sorry for what you've done, and being humbled before God, and these are very good and right things, but in and of themselves that isn't repentance. Repentance is about turning away from your sin and running completely in the other direction. And that is how you prepare for the kingdom of heaven. That's how you will be welcomed into the kingdom of

heaven. Repent of your sin and believe. Now of course Jesus is going to expand on the detail of this throughout the gospel of Matthew but the heart of coming into a right relationship with God starts and always has started with repentance, right from the beginning of Old Testament times through to today.

How often do you think about the kingdom of God? How often do you think about how good it is going to be? About how great you are going to feel on that day when Jesus returns and God's kingdom fully and finally comes. It has begun, through Jesus work on the cross; Satan, sin and death have been defeated and God is reigning right now. But the fullest expression of God's kingdom is yet to come and it will come in all its glory when Jesus returns. How often do you think about that day? When you see death and mourning

and crying and pain do you long for Jesus to come again and set it all right. When you see what we've done to our environment do you long for the day when Jesus will come to restore everything and bring in the new heavens and the new earth? Do you long for justice to be fully and finally done for every act of evil that has ever been committed, both seen and unseen? Do you long for that day?

And how much do you think about repentance in terms of turning around and running as far as possible in the opposite direction from that particular sin as you can? I often confess my sins and feel sorry about them and know that because of Jesus I am fully and completely forgiven but I'm not sure I think all that often about how I can run so far in the opposite direction that that particular sin will never be a problem again. How about you? And that

type of thinking goes more to the heart of repentance than perpetually feeling sorry for a sin that I commit over and over again.

Please think deeply over and pray about these things today.

And that's all from me for now. Tomorrow we meet Peter for the first time as Jesus begins to fish for men. I'll see you then.