

“Kingdom, repentance, and following” (Mt 4:12-23)

Now when he heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee. And leaving Nazareth he went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: “The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned.” From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” While walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him. And going on from there he saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him. And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people.

I thought that we could summarize our today’s message in these three joyful words. They are – Kingdom, repentance and following. Kingdom, repentance and following. And then we can all say “amen”.

This is exactly what we’ll do today, just with some explanations. You see, sometimes we are so used to our Church’s language, to our Christian vocabulary that we tend to forget what marvelous a message is revealed to us with these words.

The other thing is that what may seem familiar and well known to us, may at the same time be strange and even unheard to those outside of the Church. In either case, it is beneficial for us to review what we understand by these words.

Let us begin with the word ‘kingdom’. Think about it, what picture do you imagine when you hear this phrase ‘the Kingdom of God’? The first thing that comes to my mind is ancient kingdoms.

Something from ancient times. Territories ruled by ancient kings. Something like ancient Egypt, or Babylon, or Persia, and so on. For me the picture would be about something ancient, and about something located in a specific territory.

If these are also your associations, then we all need to admit that ... we are so wrong. When Jesus speaks about the Kingdom of God, or about the Kingdom of Heaven, what He has in mind is something very different. What is it?

Much better way to translate the phrase ‘the Kingdom of God’ would be with ‘the reign of God’, or ‘the royal ruling of God’. The point is that God rules, God Himself reigns. It is about God’s activity, about God in action.

When Jesus says that the Kingdom of God is among us, He announces that God Himself has come down from heaven to be among us to reign. He is acting among us to expand His influence. What exactly does it mean?

It means nothing less than that God Himself, in the person of Jesus Christ has come to rescue us from under the power of Satan and to bring us under His wing, to save us.

Every single person who is born after the Fall is born as a captive of Satan, sin and death. We can say that every person born after the Fall belongs to the Kingdom of Satan.

And as we know from the very beginning he has been using the same old trick to keep people in his kingdom. You know the trick, right? He keeps telling people that by rejecting true God they will be free and they themselves will be like gods, meaning, we will be in control.

So many are deceived this way. The truth is, that by these lies people are robbed of their freedom, they are lead away from the very source of everything good and joyful, away from true God, into Satan's slavery.

In this situation, Jesus Christ comes to destroy the power of Satan, and to free people from this slavery and to give them true freedom, true life, true peace, true joy, and so on.

This is what the Kingdom of God means, the ongoing battle to liberate the captives of Satan and to bring them under Jesus' wings. And don't make a mistake, for this is exactly what the Church is about.

You are the front line in this battle between these two kingdoms. Jesus has freed you from this slavery and now He has called you to help others. Jesus expands His reign through us. He reigns through us, whatever ordinary people we may be.

Remember, He has given you His Spirit. He has entrusted you His Gospel, and whenever you share His message the Holy Spirit goes forth into His rescue mission, battling for the souls of those people around us, who are still lost.

If you ever wonder why there is never peace in the Church, especially if we try to be faithful to our Lord Jesus, this is the answer. You are in the middle of the battle between two kingdoms and your opponent will use every dirty trick to destroy your efforts.

But as we participate in this battle we also need to know that this is not a battle between two equals. By no means! In fact, the war already is won, and what is going on are only local battles.

Satan, sin and even death are already defeated. They have no power over you. Now we are simply watching their agonizing rage, for they know that they are defeated.

What we are waiting for is not to find out who will win, not at all, we are waiting for our victorious Lord to return in His heavenly glory and to bring forth a new heavens and new earth. This is what 'the Kingdom of God' is about.

Second word was repentance. This is what the Old Testament prophets preached. This is what John the Baptist preached. And this is how Jesus begun His preaching. "Repent and believe in the Gospel!"

What is this repentance? How would you explain it to others? The Greek word used in the New Testament means ‘change of mind’. The Old Testament uses the picture of ‘turning back’. Put these two images together and you will get the picture what repentance is.

Open your eyes, know the truth, Satan has been leading you on the way of death. Now the reign of God has begun, change your mind and turn back to your God, step on the way of life.

Imagine that you were walking on path with high hopes to get to the place of joy and peace and well-being, but then you suddenly realize that this path will end into abyss of death and destruction. What do you do?

You change your mind, you understand that that has been a wrong way, and you turn around towards the One, whose reign has begun and who has showed how much He loves you by taking your place in God’s judgment.

If you get this picture of what repentance means right, it becomes very clear why to become a Christian means a new life. For it means total change of mind and total change of direction. You step of the way of life.

Repentance is a big thing. Very big. And no one would do this radical change unless they realize that their old mindset and their old direction lead into death, regardless of how much in control they may feel right now.

This is where we get to the last word, – following. That is, following Jesus Christ. When I was reflecting on these verses I remembered my thoughts many years ago, when I first heard from Jesus: “Follow me!”

I remember reading these verses from Matthew and, to be honest, I didn’t like them. They seemed too demanding. “What do you mean, leave everything and follow me? Are you out of your mind, dear Jesus?!”

The problem is not in these verses, the problem is not in Jesus’ words ‘follow me’, the true problem is in us. In our rebellious and self-centered hearts. We don’t want to listen God, for we want to be like gods ourselves.

Sure, you have heard people saying that they won’t go to the Church, for they are not going to listen someone to preach them, especially from high above. “To preach” means to speak with authority.

Listening to preaching means to listen to Jesus Himself who uses ordinary human beings to deliver His invitation to the ends of the earth. It happens in preaching, when Jesus speaks to you and says ‘follow me’.

The reason people don’t like it is because it is a clash of authorities. Who will be god, me or this Jesus? When Jesus says to us “follow me”, we perceive it as oppressive. He wants to take away my freedom, my control over my life.

This is, why people come up with ridiculous excuses. “Yes, I am happy to be a Christian, but on my own terms. I will determine what it means to follow Jesus. And I will determine how I will do it and when I will do it.” How foolish...

When Jesus called His disciples, they didn't reply: "Yes, I may have every fifth Friday evening a few hours to follow you. But only if I feel up to. Otherwise, it won't work for me." Jesus called and they followed.

When Jesus calls you, He gives your freedom. He gives you a new life here, and in the age to come. As one pastor said, when Jesus calls you, He confiscates you for Himself.

You don't belong to Satan anymore, you belong to Jesus. Remember how we say it is Luther's explanation to the second article of the Apostles' Creed?

"Jesus has redeemed me, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death... ."

Why would He do all of this? Why? "So that I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness." There is nothing better in this world than to belong to Jesus.

Just think for a moment, who is this One who calls you? The same Jesus Christ, who has all authority in heaven and on earth, the Creator of everything that exist, holy, loving, gracious and merciful God.

The same person, who loves you more than His own life. He wants to be your God, He wants to give you all that He has, He wants to care for you and to love you with all His heart.

It is this Jesus who says to you: "Follow me"! Be with me, be my disciple, be my brother and be my sister. Come and receive your place in God's eternal Kingdom, in this new heaven and new earth! Come!

There is no greater privilege, there is no greater joy than when Jesus says to you: "Follow me!" It means that you are a chosen one, chosen by God, to be with Him, under His protection and care. How good is that?!

These are the three joyful words I wanted to share with you today. Now we have reviewed how to explain them to others. God's Kingdom, that is, Jesus active reign and power among us through His Word and Spirit.

Repent, change your mind and turn back to God. He is the source of everything good and He desires to be your God. Follow me! This is the greatest honour any human being can receive, this invitation from the Lord of Creation Himself.

"Follow me, and where I am, you will also be with me." And now we can all joyfully say "Amen!"

And the peace of God that surpasses all human understanding keep your minds and hearts in Jesus Christ. Amen.