

## **“Repent and believe in the Gospel!” Mark 1:14-20**

**“Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.” Passing alongside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men.” And immediately they left their nets and followed him. And going on a little farther, he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending the nets. And immediately he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants and followed him.”**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

“Repent and believe in the Gospel!” These are the key words in every proclamation. Always have been, always will be. This is what the prophets of the old spoke, this is what John the Baptist proclaimed, this is how Jesus begun His ministry, and that was the message that the apostles announced to the world – as one after another they were murdered because of this message.

It is interesting, theologians from other denominations have praised highly one particular teaching that our Dr Martin Luther, guided by the Holy Spirit, was able to articulate. That is the teaching on the distinction of the Law and the Gospel.

Luther didn’t “discover America” when he famously and helpfully summarized that the whole Scripture contains these two central teachings – the Law and the Gospel. That the Lord of the Scripture speaks to us in these two main ways.

He speaks to us His Law – His holy and unchanging will, what He expects from us, what He has created us to be and to do. He also speaks to us His Gospel – the shocking revelation about His gracious attitude towards, us and about everything that He has done for us in Jesus Christ.

What Luther so clearly summarized, it wasn’t a new teaching – for it had always been around summarized in these words: “Repent and believe in the Gospel!” I invite you today to reflect once again what these words means for us and how are we to respond to them.

**First, let’s talk about repentance.** What it is, and what it is not. There is this idea that repentance means that Christians need to live in this mood that we are all bad, so bad... miserable sinners, that we need to be ashamed of who we are, and so on.

I suspect this image comes from some sort of Middle Age piety, that people may have seen in movies. No joy, no pleasures, no fun, just guilt and shame and misery. A very bleak and depressing picture... if that was true. But it is not.

It is the very opposite to whipping ourselves for being bad. It is a joyful thing that finally we hear the voice of the Triune God calling us, that we stop our wandering, heed to the divine wisdom and listen to what our God gently speaks to us.

For He tells us something really important – that on our own, without Him, without the loving God the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, we will always be searching and chasing for something that is missing in our lives.

That without Him we will always be serving some other gods hoping that they will satisfy our deepest longing. The truth is – they won't. They will enslave us, they will demand us to sacrifice our time and energy, our sweat and blood, our relationships and freedoms, but they will not, they cannot give us what we long for.

The Triune God calls us to wake up this reality, to change our mind, to trust Him, to alter our life-direction, to re-centre our lives. To have another foundation, another source of everything good.

To trust someone who actually knows us, understands us, cares for us, and is willing and capable to give us that life that we all are dreaming about in our hearts. He calls us to Himself. He wants to be your God, and He want you to know that.

Once we listen to His voice, once the Holy Spirit helps us see ourselves and our lives in the light of God's word, once the Law of God reveals us that our current path leads to disappointment and to death, and we finally are willing to change our directions – that is repentance.

As we said, it is a joyful, joyful thing; for it means that we stop meaningless wandering after false gods of this world and return into the fellowship with the true God, to the place where we truly belong, to our eternal home. That's repentance.

**Now, what then is the Gospel?** What it is not? Again, there is this widespread false idea that if we know that God forgives all our sins, then we are free to live the way it pleases us. That that Gospel is something like a license to sin.

"I know that God forgives me, therefore I can't be bothered with anything else." It is almost like a modern-day equivalent of indulgences. You buy your indulgence and then you can do whatever you want, for your sins are already paid for. It is such a foolishness to believe that way. But it seems that many do...

The Gospel is God in action, it is God's creative power that transforms us on the deepest level. The beams of this radiant power first reached us when we first heard the voice of our Creator and Redeemer: "Repent! Return to me!"

We listened to this voice. Since then, God's own Spirit has been active in us, purifying our minds, reorganizing our priorities, changing our life-direction, and now He is leading us closer and closer to the very source of this amazing power.

And as it happens, as we experience more of God's presence, we also experience more of His transforming nature.

We need to understand – the Gospel doesn't come to us just as an information. The Gospel message is delivered to us by God's own Spirit; so important is this message that the Holy Spirit Himself brings it to us.

And as He brings this life-changing message to us, He stays with us. God's Spirit with His creative power is the One who gently reshapes our hearts. He is the One who re-moulds us according to the beautiful image of Jesus.

We could say that the proclamation and hearing of the Gospel is the Triune God Himself stepping into our lives as a whirlwind and turning everything upside down. He comes to us and reveals something incredibly important.

He comes to you and announces that since the very beginning He has been waiting for you. That He has been preparing the way for you to return to Him. That He – Himself has done everything to remove every obstacle that stood between you and Him and your life together in New Heavens and New Earth.

Now the path is ready, it had been made straight for you, it still may be narrow, and demanding, and dangerous, and costly, but at the end to the road you will find what you have always dreamed about, even if unconsciously.

We can sense that we are created for great and majestic lives. This is why we long for greatness, for glory, for joy and excitement, for love so strong and overwhelming that it consumes you. But none of these things is found in this life.

In this age everything is fleeing, we keep chasing after wind, and at the end, as Solomon taught us... it is all vanity. All is vanity. But then the Triune God steps in and makes all of that real for us. He offers and He gives to us this life that has power to fulfil all our heartfelt desires.

He gives us Himself and He opens His family for us, He takes us out of this world into a better one. He begins it already now as He brings us into His Church, this community of God's saints that live guided by different principles.

Where the Triune God is the centre of everything. Where we live to love and please our God and to serve our neighbours. Where we consider others more important than ourselves, where we pray for one another.

Where we imitate our God by serving one another, and where the greatest are those, who need our help the most. The Gospel reveals all this otherworldly beauty and self-sacrificial love of our God, and when we see it, when we experience it, that is how He wins our hearts, and that is how He becomes our greatest treasure.

That's the Gospel... The power for our salvation, the power for our transformation, the power for new hope filled lives in Christ.

**Finally, the third question.** It had to deal with our response. What happens after we repent and hear the Gospel, and what doesn't or shouldn't happen. When the voice of the Father speaks into our lives, when we hear the Gospel, when the Holy Spirit breaks into our hearts, everything changes. Everything...

If the holy God intrudes into your life, you can't simply go ahead as before. God's presence with you is not a fiction. It is not a formality. You may have met people who say that they believe that there is this God and He forgives their sins, that they know that, but otherwise ... it doesn't change anything for them.

When you meet Jesus, when the Holy Spirit descends on you, that is impossible. Because this is personal. This is about you. It is you who are under God's law. It is you who are found guilty and deserving eternal punishment.

It is you, in whose place Jesus steps in and says: "Spare them, punish me, take my life instead, and let them live!" That is not some general information. That is deliverance from the final judgement and from eternal death. Miraculous and undeserved. That is a matter of our fate before God now and forever. This encounter with God is the most important thing that can happen with anyone.

And then, this friendly voice says to you: "Now, follow me! I have purchased you. You are mine. I will teach you, guide you, protect you, fill your life with joy and meaning, I will be with you in all your challenges.

I will weep with you in all your sorrows, and when your time is over, I will raise you to live with me in that beautiful place which I have prepared for you, there you will forget about everything that saddened and hurt you here."

When Jesus calls us, we may not change what we do, or where we live, or with whom we associate. Or we may. That's beside the point. But everything will be different. As Paul wrote to our brothers and sisters in Rome:

"For [now, when we are welcomed into God's family] none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. For if we live [and whatever we do in this life], we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord." (Romans 14:7-7)

What begins with the call "repent!", what continues with the proclamation of the beautiful Gospel, will come to consummation when Jesus returns in His glory and takes us to Himself. "Repent and believe in the Gospel!" Amen.