

“Jesus told them, ‘This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all the nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.’” Luke 24: 46-49.

Dear Friends,

I wonder how you would describe the Gospel of the Good News of Jesus Christ?

The Reformed traditions within Christian faith and spirituality might argue that it is summarised by the statement *“Salvation by grace through faith”*. Some may say that the Good News is eternal life in heaven achieved through Jesus’ death and resurrection. Others would add that it is more therapeutic in nature, that faith in Christ makes life now bearable. There are even those that would say that the Good News is the blessing of God which enables us to prosper, particularly in the financial sense. There is truth in each of these views, except the last of course, which is an abhorrent distortion, and which leads to the manipulation of others for the benefit of a few.

I think that each of the positive statements about the Gospel are less what the Gospel is and more what it leads to. In the passage quoted above, Luke hints at something that Matthew places centre stage in the early chapters of his Gospel. He writes: *“From that time on Jesus began to preach, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’”* Matt. 4: 17.

The content of the Gospel is the availability of the life of the kingdom in the here and now because of the presence of the Kingdom in the person of Jesus, or subsequently, through the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Because of Jesus the presence of God in this world is no longer located behind a curtain in the “Holy of Holies” in the Temple in Jerusalem. Remember, that curtain was torn in two from top to bottom the moment Jesus died on the cross. The presence and life of God is now accessible to all, whoever they are and wherever they may be. The only condition associated with it in both the passage from Matthew and the quote I began with from Luke, is the need for repentance. But what is that, except a word that has gone out of fashion because we do not like it?

To repent literally means to stop going in one direction, to turn around, and to start going in the opposite direction.

If you are anything like me, your SatNav tells you to repent on a regular basis – it just calls it a U-Turn!

So, in Matt 4, what Jesus says to all those who will listen is this: *“Stop walking away from God. Turn around. Walk towards God and you will find God’s arms open to welcome you into the Kingdom.”*

That is the content of the Gospel message Jesus preached and it is memorably summed up by Jesus himself in the parable of the Prodigal Son. The younger son in that story walks away from his father. He turns his back on him. He makes a mess of things and it is only when he is

at his lowest that he “*comes to his senses*” and decides to turn around and head home. The decision is enough for the Father. He does not even let the son express his well-rehearsed apology. He just raps him up in a great big bear-hug!

Why does Jesus ask us to repent, to turn around? Because he knows that the primary issue to be dealt with in the human heart is that of pride.

Our human ego wants to place itself on the throne in our own little Kingdom when that place rightfully belongs to our Creator. It is why Jesus teaches us to pray “*Thy Kingdom Come,*” not “*My kingdom come.*” It is why the first of the Ten Commandments is “*You shall have no other God before me.*”

Jesus knows that we are proficient at making gods of our own desires. And Jesus knows that is not what is best for us. Most of the rest of the pages of the four gospels are taken up with describing what life looks like when you choose to live from within the kingdom of heaven rather than outside of it.

But the quote from Luke 24 is vital to understand what life in the kingdom of heaven on earth looks like. When we live from within the kingdom of heaven on earth then we live with the Spirit of God coursing through our veins – the very presence of Jesus himself speaking words of comfort, wisdom and truth to guide us in how to live our lives as if Jesus were living them through us. And, of course, Pentecost, reminds us that the power of the Spirit is available to each of us. But for what purpose? Simply to equip us to share the content of the Gospel of Jesus with others, whoever they are, wherever we may find them. We are called to live in the kingdom to help others find their way into the kingdom. We are called to be disciples to make disciples. The content of the Gospel cannot be separated from the task of sharing it with others.

As we continue to live within the restrictions of the current pandemic, I want to encourage you to reflect upon the following questions, as we move towards a time when our restrictions are lifted somewhat:

- What is your understanding of the content of the Gospel and how would you describe it to someone else?
- What is your experience of repentance?
- How have you experienced the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in your life? If you have not, what do you long for that to look like? Jesus simply tells us to “ask and you will receive.”
- In what ways might you and your congregation share the Gospel of Jesus with others now, during our restrictions?
- How might you and your congregation make a difference to your local community through the power of the Spirit, as we look towards our restrictions being eased?

With every blessing,

Rev Tim Perkins