



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea THE THIRD SUNDAY
The Episcopal Church AFTER EPIPHANY
in Destin, Florida January 22, 2023

A homily by the Reverend James J. Popham

Jesus' message in this morning's reading from the Gospel according to Matthew is a like a bowling ball launched down the alley at the array of waiting ten pins. We see it coming, and we know pretty much what is going to happen. Pins will be flying in all directions, and the perfect prescribed order in which they were set will be obliterated.

What Jesus was saying portended a disruption in the *status quo* that never could be reset as it had been before. Now we know the rest of the story, and we know that Jesus' message had such impact on the world that until very recently the history of the world was divided into the time before Christ and the time after Christ.

So what was that message, why was it so consequential, and why did Jesus debut this seminal message in Galilee? Let's start there. Why Galilee in the first place?

Like any good politician or prophet, Jesus was not going to launch his movement in some little lucky fishing village. Like any good politician, he hardly would deliver his first campaign speech in an area that was closed-minded or hostile to his message.

And he certainly was not going to introduce his message where it might be well-received, but no media coverage could be had to spread it, so to speak, keeping in mind that the closest thing to mass media at the time was word-of-mouth via a human being and a camel.

So, after 40 days in the desert praying and discerning and resisting temptation, Jesus realized that Galilee checked all the boxes

First, Galilee was densely populated, with 204 villages, each with a population of around 15,000, in an area about 50 miles north to south and 25 miles east to west. That's lots of ears in a small area.

Second, Galilee also was at the crossroads. Going from Damascus to Egypt or Africa, you went through Galilee. Going out to the frontiers to the east, you went through Galilee. As one observer put it, "Judaea is on the way to

nowhere: Galilee is on the way to everywhere." What got said in Galilee did not stay there for long.¹

But, mainly, the Galileans were likely to be receptive to what Jesus would say. The Galileans, unlike the Judeans, were not isolated from Gentile influences, bordered as they were on the west by the Phoenicians, the north and east by the Syrians, and the south by the Samaritans. And this says nothing of the fact that Galilee had been invaded and conquered and overrun with foreigners more often than they might have cared to admit. Furthermore, as a culture, they were known for chivalry and "more anxious for honour than for gain."

Even more important, in the words of the great Jewish historian Josephus, "They were ever fond of innovations, and by nature disposed to changes, and delighted in seditions." Good, open-minded, curious people.

So Jesus launched his seditious enterprise that still haunts the nations and cultures and economies of the western world in Galilee, where he would have some assurance that his message would root deeply and spread widely.

And the nucleus of that message and, indeed, of his entire ministry was the simple sentence, "the kingdom of heaven," by which he meant the Kingdom of God, "has come near."

Jesus' use of the word kingdom was not casual. It was deliberate. It was threatening. In announcing the kingdom of God, Jesus was rolling the ball down the alley, the status quo would be shattered, and nothing would ever be the same again. And those who heard it, knew it.

Because the only other kingdom at the time was Rome and the Jewish kings it appointed to rule in Palestine. But in the Kingdom of God, now approaching, God would be on the throne, not Caesar, not Herod. And that message would cost Jesus his life. Yet the message, so supremely vindicated in the resurrection, lives on. The Kingdom of God has come near in Jesus, and it never has receded into the tattered pages of ancient history

Jesus' words pose the same question today as they did 2000 years ago. We may suffer no oppressive human king, but Jesus' message still confronts the economic, social, and political realities of the world we live in. So, we still must ask, in God's kingdom, where God's values and vision rather than human values govern, what would that world look like?

¹ <https://www.studydrive.org/commentaries/eng/dsb/matthew-4.html>

What would a world faithful to Christ's message of love and light and compassion and peace and justice and mercy, of purity, holiness, healing, and prosperity for all, be like?

These never will be idle questions for us. When Jesus said repent, he denied us the luxury of disinterest, indifference, or neutrality. Because the two directions go different ways. And the direction we choose has enormous consequence. N.T. Wright, former Bishop of Durham – that's in England – and now professor at the University of St. Andrew's – also in England, not surprisingly said it as well as it can be said:

If the light-bearers insist on darkness, darkness they shall have. If the peace people insist on war, war they shall have. If the people called to bring God's love and forgiveness into the world insist on hating everyone else, hatred and all that it brings will come crashing around their ears. This will not be an arbitrary judgment or punishment; it will be what they themselves have been calling for. This is why they must repent while there is still time. The kingdom is coming, and they are standing in the way.²

The repentance that Jesus called for is a task for peoples and nations and communities, not isolated individuals. Our cultural bias towards individualism, individual rights, individual responsibilities, self-determination, self-fulfillment, and self-reliance can make that hard for us to understand. But when Jesus called for repentance, Jesus was not speaking to individuals. He meant to reorient their entire culture from human values to divine values.

None of us can understate the challenge. But when Jesus taught us to pray, he wanted us to mean it when we prayed, "thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Our task is not to go to heaven. Our job is to bring heaven to earth.

² N.T. Wright, N.T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part 1* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2004) 30..