

**Matthew 4v12-23**  
*RUCU – 30<sup>th</sup> April 2009*

OK, we're looking at this passage from Matthew 4. It's part of a series this term looking at some of the encounters Jesus has with people, and how he interacts with them. Here, we've got the beginning of Jesus ministry – this is where he goes public with his message.

We've got two soundbites from Jesus. I have mixed feelings about soundbites. Apparently we live in a "soundbite generation" – we like to have news or politics or philosophy or whatever boiled down to a sentence or two. I bet you can think of loads off the top of your head. "I have a dream." "We don't do God." "To boldly go where no-one has gone before."

Soundbites don't usually go well for me. As many of you know, I have a talent for saying things which get quoted badly. Apparently Surrey CU are compiling a list of incriminating quotes to give to Nay (my boss) if I step out of line...

But here we've got two great soundbites which capture some really important aspects of why Jesus came and what he had to say. There's a general one, and then one to his followers.

**"Repent** for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

**"Follow me**, and I will send you out to fish for people."

We're going to look at this passage in two chunks around each of these soundbites. If you like headings, the first section is "**Repent**," the second is "**Follow**."

Soundbite #1: **REPENT**

At the start of this passage we're told that John the Baptist is in prison, and Jesus takes this as his cue to begin his public teaching ministry. But the first thing he does is move house!

Some of you will think this is a really boring details. Personally I developed a bit of an obsession with property programmes like "To Buy or Not to Buy" over the Easter holidays. But either way, *this is one of the most important changes of address of all time!*

If you look back over chapter 2, this isn't the first time Jesus has moved house. Every time he does it's significant, because it fulfils a promise God made about him. Now Jesus moves house to Capernaum, on the shore of the Sea of Galilee.

This move fulfils another of God's promises, and this one is MASSIVE! Matthew quotes a chunk of **Isaiah chapter 9** (it's a traditional Christmas passage). This is a huge promise through Isaiah, written 700 years earlier, that God would send someone who would bring joy, freedom and peace. That someone would be Wonderful counsellor, mighty God, everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. God himself stepping in to sort things out. And Matthew is declaring Jesus to **be** the great light – **the Messiah has come!** The wonderful counsellor is here. The wait is over, God's promised one has arrived! It's massive.

Jesus begins to preach. We're given an overview of his message here. Not the whole thing – like I said, it's a soundbite. (The next bit of preaching we get covers 3 chapters). But this is a summary; it's the essential heartbeat of Jesus' message.

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

Again, if we'd read Matthew from the beginning, it wouldn't be the first time we've heard this. Look at 3v2 - John was preaching the same thing. So is there any difference?

We need to look again at these Old Testament bits Matthew adds.

He called John, “*one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’*”

But when he talks about Jesus, he says, “*The people walking in darkness have seen a great light.*”

**John the Baptist was the messenger**, the one sent ahead. He was saying repent and get ready because someone is coming – the wait is almost over.

But **Jesus was the one they were waiting for!** He is the light that has dawned.

So he’s saying: *‘Repent because I’m here, no more waiting, the kingdom of heaven is here!’*

OK, now I think we need to tease out what repent actually means. It’s not a word we use very often, even amongst Christians. So what does it mean?

The way the Bible uses it, **repent** means **turn back to God**. So John the Baptist was calling people to *turn back to God* because God was about to do what he’d been promising all along.

Now Jesus is calling people to *turn back to God*, because **God’s doing it**.

So that’s what it means, but what does it look like? How does it work out in real life.

I think it’s really important that we see there are **two parts** to repentance, and both parts are critical.

Let me explain what I mean. To do that, we’re going to have to depart slightly from Matthew, but we’ll end up back here...

To understand properly how we turn back to God, we need to think a bit about how we’ve turned away from God. We need to think about the situation we’re in to begin with. Look with me at Jeremiah 2v13 (keep a finger in Matthew 4 though, because we’re coming back).

*“My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water.*”

God’s people had turned away from Him. But as if that wasn’t bad enough, they turned to other things to fill the gap. It was like ignoring a stream of fresh, life-giving water which never runs out, in favour of a leaky hole in the ground which never holds enough water. It’s ridiculous, isn’t it?

It should be the easiest game of “Would You Rather” ever! But throughout the Bible, that’s what people do. People who’d known God’s goodness to them in real, undeniable ways. But at every opportunity, they turned away from him and put their trust in other things instead. Sometimes it was idols made of wood or metal. Sometimes they ran off to the governments of other countries and trusted them for help (which they never did). Time and again, God’s people turned away from him and turned towards idols – they worshipped and trusted other stuff.

It’s easy to think they were stupid for worshipping lumps of wood. But think about how your own life compares. You don’t have to think for very long to realise that this is exactly what we do too.

We’re designed to worship; we’re designed to worship God, the God who made everything and sustains everything, including us. When we reject and ignore God, we don’t just worship nothing. We do what we’re designed to do - we worship. We put something else in God’s place.

And this applies to people who aren’t Christians, but even worse it applies to people who are, people who should know better. We say God is number 1, but we so easily push him out of the way and put other things in his place.

They may well be things which are good on their own. But they will *always* be rubbish compared to him, and they will never satisfy us. They will always be like a leaky hole in the ground. The thing with a leaky cistern is that you go to it to be refreshed and to have your thirst quenched, but when you get there you just find dust. So you have to fill it with water before you can drink – **you** end up slaving away to fill **it** up. And that’s what happens with these stupid things we put in God’s place – we end up slaves to them.

There’s an easy way to found out what your God-replacement might be. What is it which makes your life worth living? Or what couldn’t you possibly live without? If I could take it away, life wouldn’t be worth living. It could be all kinds of things. Success. Money. Sex. Friends. Possessions. Anything which becomes more important than God.

So there are two parts to our rejection of God, our sin. Turning away from God but also the things we put in his place. So there have to be two parts to **repentance**, because it has to tackle both of these. It’s turning **away** from the things we’ve been worshipping, and turning **to** God.

If we **just turn to God**, then it’s impossible to worship God fully because we’re still giving other stuff top spot in our hearts. And God won’t just sit happily next to your boyfriend or your iPhone or your degree certificate. We need to stop worshipping ridiculous God-replacements. But if we just concentrate on **just turning away from stuff**, then repentance becomes just a list of stuff you can’t do – who would want to do that? Repentance is about turning **to** the awesome God who made us and loves us!  
We need both.

This is the heart of Jesus’ message for the world. **“Repent, because the kingdom of heaven has come near. The wait is over, the gates are wide open, so come on in. *But leave your idols at the door!*”**

There’s one really obvious application from this. There’s one really obvious way we need to put this to work in our lives. Here it is:

“Repent, because the kingdom of heaven has come near.” Do as he says!

**Maybe you need to repent for the first time**, if you’re here and you aren’t a Christian, or you aren’t sure. You need to turn around. You need to turn around from your life without God, worshipping other things that will never satisfy you, and turn back to the God who made you, and who loves you.

But you might be thinking, *‘how can God possibly accept me after I’ve ignored him.’* And **you should**. It means you’ve realised how serious the situation is – we’ve destroyed our relationship with God by ignoring him. The great news is **Jesus has made it possible**. Jesus didn’t just come bringing a message and dishing out demands. He can say this because he also brought the means for it to happen. **He died** to pay for our *rejection of God*, and for our *detestable worship* of stupid things. And so when we turn back to God, he will accept us with open arms, because Jesus has paid for the offence we’ve caused him. So **turn around**.

But as I said earlier, this is not just for people who aren’t Christians. Repentance isn’t just a one-off, once in a lifetime thing. It’s amazing how we can turn over our lives to God, but then so easily turn back to worshipping stupid replacement gods. Believe me, I know. So repentance has to be an ongoing thing. We need to be constantly turning away from stupid imitations and back to God. And the great news is that there is always more grace. There is always more forgiveness, because of what Jesus has done. So repent.

And, of course, if what we've seen is true – that the kingdom of heaven has come near, that Jesus is the one God sent to sort everything out, if we have turned away from the God who made us, and if Jesus has made it possible to turn back, then we need to tell other people. *We can't keep this to ourselves!*

But remember we're calling people to repent **because the kingdom of God has come near**. An eternity with the almighty creator of the universe, who made us and loves us, is on offer. So yes, we call people to turn from their old ways, but it's *because* we're calling them to a new way which is infinitely better. Make sure you get the balance right!

### Second soundbite: FOLLOW ME

Cut to Jesus out for a stroll by the lake. He meets a couple of fishermen, Andrew and Simon, about their business. Verse 19 records one sentence of their conversation: "Come, follow me, and I will send you out to fish for people." Again, I'm pretty sure this isn't his entire sales pitch, but it's the gist of what he said. And they immediately accept. They don't say, 'OK, just let me finish this.' They drop the nets and go with him. Later on he meets two more, James and John. He makes the same offer and he gets the same response – they leave their dad with the boat, and off they go.

Jesus calls these guys to follow him - to go where he goes, to do what he does. But, in particular, he promises them that they'll still be fishing. Only this time, they won't be fishing for fish, they'll be fishing for people. A lot about the process will be the same – they'll go out to where the people are, and bring them in. Only this time they won't be trapping people in a net and hauling them in. They'll be proclaiming Jesus' message about the kingdom of heaven being open and drawing them in. Instead of a trap, it's a rescue!

In the last section we heard a summary of Jesus' message to the world – Repent. Here, we've got Jesus' call to those who would follow him – it's a bit more personal, and a bit more specific. But the two commands, 'repent' and 'follow me' are linked (we'll see how in a second).

On the face of it, this seems really simple. But what I want to do, just to finish, is to open up this one sentence a bit. And I want us to see three things about what it meant for these fishermen to follow Jesus, and what it will mean for us to follow Jesus. So here they are:

#### **1) The call to follow Jesus is for everyone.**

Jesus is putting together his crack team of followers who are going to go with him on his critical mission, calling people to repentance. Imagine you were putting this group together – who'd be in your J-Team? Surely you'd have the top people you could find. You'd have a few really clever people on their. Maybe some academics, or a few entrepreneurs. Maybe you'd want a few politicians or some celebrities as crowd pullers.

But that isn't the logic Jesus used. These fishermen were ordinary blokes, they had ordinary jobs. They weren't rich, they weren't powerful, they weren't well educated. And the rest of the group who join later aren't much different – collaborators, doubters, rebels, even a traitor.

But this little group of followers is a mixed bag because the kingdom of heaven is a mixed bag. The call to follow Jesus is for everyone. But that isn't because there are no standards. This is for everyone because it doesn't depend on anything you or I have done. I said earlier that Jesus makes it possible for us to turn back to God, by paying for the offense we've caused Him. Because it's about him, and not about you, then it doesn't matter who you are, or what you've done. It doesn't depend on your status or your upbringing. It doesn't depend on your wealth, or your exam results.

It depends totally on Jesus, who died to bring us back to God. So the call to follow Jesus is open to everyone, including you, right now.

## 2) The call to follow Jesus is a call to sacrifice.

When Jesus calls these guys to follow him, they leave their nets behind and go. But these guys weren't out fishing for fun. This was their livelihood – it kept a roof over their heads and food on the table.

Following Jesus **may well involve giving stuff up**. Maybe it will involve putting off buying that new TV or car because Jesus wants you to follow him in how you use your money? Maybe it will mean breaking off a relationship which you know isn't honouring to God, because following Jesus is more important? Maybe it will mean passing up a well paid job to serve God, maybe overseas?

Jesus calls us to follow him – to do what he does and go where he goes. And what *did* he do, where *did* he go? He went to the cross, to his death. He gave up not just his comfort, but his life for those who'll trust him.

This won't be an easy ride. It wasn't for his original followers, and it won't be for us. But they dropped their nets because they realised it was worth it – and they barely knew him at this point. Any sacrifice we have to make pales into insignificance compared to what he's done for us. It's completely worth it.

## 3) The call to follow Jesus is a call to speak for Jesus.

Jesus wasn't just calling the fishermen to follow him so they could keep the kingdom of heaven to themselves and have a cosy life. He called them so they would call others. It was part of the deal right from the start – follow me, and **I will** send you out to fish for people. That was the whole point of them following him around – they got to know him and understand him and his message, so they could go out and preach it – while he was around, but also long after he returned to heaven.

The fact we're sitting here in HUMSS JCR is part of the fruit of that. Someone told someone who told someone over and over for two thousand years, and now here we are.

And that's what the CU is here for. The CU is a group of people who've responded to the "follow me" bit, and now we're being sent out to fish for people. So this has another fairly simple outworking, and it's the point I want to leave you with. **Tell people!** Tell people that the light has dawned. Tell people that the kingdom of heaven has come near. Tell them that they need to turn around and go back to the God who loves them. And, most importantly, tell them about the one who made it all possible. **TELL THEM ABOUT JESUS!**