

Lent 1 / February 21, 2021

Mark 1:15

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”

Jesus came out of the desert after 40 days of fasting and testing and immediately began to proclaim the kingdom of God and call people to repentance and faith, saying the time is fulfilled. That's another way of saying, “the time has come.” When the time has come matters simply unfold. When the time came the communist structure of Eastern Europe, which lasted decades, seemed to collapse overnight. The wall that divided Berlin and stood as a symbol of the chasm between East and West, crumbled under the hammers of citizens on both sides. Jesus said, the time had come for the kingdom of God. Many prophets and kings foretold the coming of the kingdom of God and longed to see the day. Some had tried to make it come by human force and rebelled against the Roman kingdom. All failed, because the time had not yet come. Now the time had come! Now Jesus had come, bringing with Him the kingdom of God.

People in Israel and Judah had been waiting centuries for the kingdom of God to come. Much longer than people in Eastern Europe waited for the communist system to collapse, or people in Berlin had waited for the wall to come tumbling down. Isaiah sang, “Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and tell her that her warfare is ended.” Centuries passed and God seemed to do nothing. Then suddenly Jesus came out of the desert and announced that the time had come. Are you waiting for God to do something good in your life? Does it seem that God is doing nothing? God is always at work in the world to accomplish His saving purpose. God is always at work in the life of the body of believers on earth to fulfill His purpose in the world. God is always at work within the life of each believer, to accomplish His good in our lives in time and for eternity.

The greatest good God works is to bring His kingdom into our hearts through faith in Jesus, instilled by the Holy Spirit, through word of the gospel and the washing of holy baptism. No matter what we may want God to do in our lives, there is nothing greater than the gift of faith in Jesus. God's greatest work is to open our hearts to His grace through the gospel and create faith in our hearts. The kingdom of God, which will be fulfilled in the creation of a new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells, begins in each person's heart through faith in Jesus. Jesus' words are as fresh and powerful today, as they were the day He spoke them. Today He calls us to faith in Him as our God and Saviour, saying, “Repent and believe in the gospel.” Today He calls us as believers to consciously and intentionally put our faith into action and follow Him as our God and Saviour, saying, “Repent and believe in the gospel.”

If you told someone to repent, what would you expect them to do? Change their behaviour? A change of behaviour is what we are most likely to associate with repentance. A change in behaviour is part of repentance. John the Baptizer called people to repent. Tax Collectors asked him, “What should we do?” He told them to stop overcharging people. Roman soldiers asked the same question, he told them to stop helping tax collectors extort money from people. That was good news for the tax payers, but is a change of behaviour all there is to repentance? People can modify their behaviour to suit their circumstances, without changing their attitudes. Jesus called the Pharisees to repent. What did He want them to do? They were the most honest, moral and scrupulously upright people in the world. What did He want them to change, their actions or their attitudes? He wanted them to change their attitudes and stop trusting in their uprightness and to trust in God.

Lent is a season of repentance. During Lent Christians commonly do certain things and stop doing other things. We may give up some pleasure or convenience, to remind ourselves we do not live by bread alone, “but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.” We may take up some discipline, such as more frequent prayer, to focus on Jesus' cross and to remember His words, “Whoever would follow me must deny himself daily and take up his cross and come after me.” What does God want us to do? Certainly, Jesus wants us to do certain things and not do others as part of our lives as disciples. He wants us to hate what is evil and to love what is good; but it all begins with the attitude of faith, through which we believe in Him as our Saviour and hold Him in hearts as Lord.

Two thieves hung beside Jesus on their crosses. Both joined the crowd below in hurling insults at Him. One repented. What did he do? He certainly stopped abusing Jesus with his words, but first and foremost his attitude about Jesus changed and he saw Him as his Saviour and King, He expressed His repentance saying, “Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Repentance is to see Jesus as King, treasure Him in our hearts as Saviour and then confess Him as Lord with our lips and our lives.

People asked Jesus when the kingdom of God was going to come. He told them that it does not come by their piety, their acts of obedience, worship or service. He said “The kingdom of God is within you or among you.” The Greek word can mean either within or among. It works both ways. The kingdom of God is wherever Jesus is, within us and among us. When Jesus is in our hearts the kingdom of God is within us. When we gather with other believers around the gospel and the sacraments for worship, prayer, fellowship and mutual consolation, the kingdom of God is among us. God’s kingdom is His righteous reign, which begins with His reign in the hearts of individual believers through faith and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, received in baptism. The kingdom of God is within us, for Jesus is in our hearts. The kingdom of God is among us, for Jesus is in the hearts of our fellow believers.

The kingdom of God begins within us through the attitude or orientation of our spirits to the Spirit of God, through faith in Jesus. Faith in Jesus is to believe that through the sacrifice of His cross He made full payment for our sins, so that in Him we have peace with God in the forgiveness of sin. Repentance is a God given attitude adjustment. In Jesus we see God in a different light; not counting our sins against us, not dealing with us in wrath according to the guilt of our sin, but forgiving us in love and treating us with mercy for the sake of Jesus. Repentance is also an attitude check, as we daily consider our lives in the light of God’s righteousness and return to the water of our baptism for the grace of forgiveness and the power to walk in newness of life.

The kingdom of God is His righteous reign in our hearts through faith in Jesus. We express God’s righteous reign in our hearts, the attitude of faith, through the actions of our lives. The tax collectors who believed in Jesus, no longer extorted money from tax payers. The Roman soldiers who believed, no longer provided them with force to extort. They would even have engaged in positive expressions of repentance like worship, prayer and lending a helping hand to their neighbours. Refraining from sin and doing good works are the fruit of repentance and an expression of the kingdom of God, His righteous reign in our hearts through faith in Jesus.

Repentance and the kingdom of God begin with faith in Jesus through the hearing of the gospel. Gospel literally means “Good News.” There was a singer, I think it was the Rolling Stones or Drake, who sang “I sure could use a little good news today.” Could you use some good news today? There’s precious little in the media. And when there is good news, it’s usually a foil to set you up for more bad news. Good news: Another vaccine against the Coronavirus has been approved. Bad news: Ten more variants each worse than the previous ones, uncertainty as to the effectiveness of the new vaccines. The gospel of Jesus is good news with no downside. The gospel is all upside, literally.

The gospel is the good news that on the cross, Jesus suffered and died to pardon our sins. The gospel is the good news of the cross, for there God made Jesus who had no sin to be a sin offering, so that in Him we would receive the righteousness of God in forgiveness. The gospel is the good news of the Holy Spirit, establishing God’s kingdom within us through His indwelling that we may live lives of repentance, believing the gospel until our Saviour returns and the kingdom of God comes in the fullness of glory. God in mercy keep us to that day and bring us to that dear land of rest. In Jesus’ name. Amen