

“The Kingdom Of Heaven Is Near”

Isaiah 9:1-4

Psalm 27:1, 4-9

1 Corinthians 1:10-18

Matthew 4:12-23

John Stott, reflecting upon the influence of Christians in the world, writes,

Let me quote from the end of Kenneth Latourette’s seven-volume history of the expansion of Christianity. Referring to Jesus he says, “No life ever lived on this planet has been so influential in the affairs of men as that of Christ. From that brief life and its apparent frustration has flowed a more powerful force for the triumphal waging of man’s long battle than any other ever known by the human race....Through it, millions of people have had their inner conflicts resolved. Through it, hundreds of millions have been lifted from illiteracy and ignorance and have been placed upon the road of growing intellectual freedom.... It has done more to allay the physical ills of disease and famine than any other impulse, and it has emancipated millions from chattel slavery....It has protected tens of millions from exploitation by their fellows, and it has been the most fruitful source of movements to lessen the horrors of war and to put the relations of men and nations on the basis of justice and peace. This is the influence of Jesus through his followers in society. Don’t underestimate the power and the influence that even a small minority can exert in the community.”¹

Jesus and his movement accomplish influence one relationship at a time. By Jesus’

followers living their identity in Christ, they bring the Kingdom of Heaven near to anyone they encounter.

The texts in Isaiah 19:1-4, Psalm 27:1, 4-9, 1 Corinthians 1:10-18 and Matthew 4:12-23 demonstrate that God’s Word, written (the Bible) and God’s Word, living (Jesus), sets the bar for what it means to be fully human and experience the Kingdom of Heaven. I will focus my attention on 1 Corinthians 1:10-18 and Matthew 4:12-23.

1 Corinthians 1:10-18 makes one point for our consideration demonstrating that God’s Word, written (the Bible) and God’s Word, living (Jesus), sets the bar for what it

¹John Stott, “Christians: Salt and Light,” on *Preaching Today, Tape No. 109*.

means to be fully human and experience the Kingdom of Heaven. The point is this: Christians and congregations must resist division and focus on being united. One's identity in Christ is not divided from others with the same identity. However, more often than not, we live in division not unity. Amid church conflicts it usually rests between those who want to follow a particular leader rather than Christ. When some Christians make it a priority to follow Christ and others to follow a particular leader, the division is clearly manifested. It is this reality that wreaks havoc on individuals, congregations, and the collective witness of Jesus around the world.

Matthew 4:12-23 announces the importance of demonstrating that God's Word, written (the Bible) and God's Word, living (Jesus), sets the bar for what it means to be fully human and experience the Kingdom of Heaven. The point is this: Followers of Jesus, living their identity in Christ are to be about gathering and restoring people. Gathering and restoration are the basic and best practices of resistance in a fragmented, divided, and disintegrating world. This text is strategically placed between Jesus' baptism and temptation in the wilderness, on the one hand, and his Sermon on the Mount, on the other. In this text, we see Jesus implementing his mission. He calls all people to change direction from a self-driven life to one directed by God. Having one's identity in Christ develops a true sense of self and sense of worth. Jesus began his work of gathering and restoring people according to God's design of redemption/salvation. Jesus identifies twelve disciples to follow him and learn the mission. Jesus brought the Kingdom of Heaven near to all. Repentance/changing direction, the act of responding to Jesus' teachings takes people deeper into understanding what being human is really about. Responding to Jesus' message of healing and wholeness is life changing, a series of

incremental and intentional decisions. Experiencing healing and wholeness is an ongoing process of repentance, discovering and experiencing one's identity in Christ. God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is manifested in and through our lives.²

Today is The Third Sunday after the Epiphany. The Greek word *epiphaneia* means "manifestation." Epiphany is the celebration of the manifestation of Jesus to the Magi and the manifestation of Jesus as the Son of God, fully God and fully human, to humanity at his baptism. Observance of The Epiphany became widespread by the late fourth century.³ Will things be different in your life because of the manifestation of Jesus? Of course. But maybe a better question is, do you expect things to be different because of the manifestation of Jesus? That question being answered is how the Kingdom of Heaven comes near in your life. Trust and draw from your discovery and experience of the manifestation of Jesus Christ in your life.

God's Word, written (the Bible) and God's Word, living (Jesus), sets the bar for what it means to be fully human, which is discovering, experiencing, and living your identity in Christ. The Kingdom of Heaven is near, and you experience more of it each day as it is in heaven. Timothy Keller writes this about being anchored in transformation brought about by the Kingdom of Heaven being alive in you, and you bringing it near to others with words and behaviors that display the identity of God known in Jesus Christ,

.... Ordinary religion operates on the principle: "I live a good and moral life; therefore God accepts me." Gospel Christianity operates in the opposite way: "God accepts me unconditionally in Jesus Christ; therefore I live a good and moral life. In

²In the three paragraphs above of textual analysis, I have benefited from the thinking of James H. Evans Jr., John C. Holbert, Erin Keys, Stephen Farris, Matthew L. Skinner, Stanley P. Saunders, and Mark Abbott in *Connections, Year A, Volume 1* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), 193-195, 195-196, 197-199, 200-202, 202-203, 204-206 and 206-208.

³Brett Scott Provance, *Pocket Dictionary of Liturgy & Worship* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2009), 54.

the first case you live a good life out of the hope of a reward, with all the insecurity and self-doubts that go with it. Will you ever be good enough? How will you know if you are...? In the Christian approach the motivation is not one of fear but of grateful joy. You live to please and resemble the one who saved you at infinite cost to himself by going to the cross. You serve him not in order to coerce him to love you but because he already does.⁴

It is true that the internal psychological and motivational dynamics of one's personality are transformed and continue to be transformed by Christ.

Be transformed by the teachings of Jesus. Gather and restore people. Gathering and restoration are the basic and best practices of resistance in a fragmented, divided, and disintegrating world. Continue to discover and experience your sense of self and sense of worth in your identity in Christ. Amen.

This sermon was preached (for the In-Person, Online, and Village TV 6 congregations) on Sunday, 22 January 2023 by the Rev. Dr. Steven M. Marsh at Geneva Presbyterian Church in Laguna Woods, California

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⁴Timothy Keller, *Making Sense of God* (New York, New York: Viking, 2016), 137.