

3rd SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

St. Matthew 4:12-24

“Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near.” The line is so familiar to us, in fact it is too familiar. We have heard it so many times that it practically washes over us without leaving a mark. And this is the beauty and the danger of Our Lord’s message preached today. We, who attend Mass regularly, hear these remarkable phrases year after year but in doing so we can become somewhat immune to their radical nature. It may even have been so for the people of Our Lord’s generation. The message to repent was no more new then than it is now. The prophet Isaiah, as St. Matthew tells, was proclaiming this seven hundred years before Christ, and it had been proclaimed regularly since that time—right up to St. John the Baptist who, as we have heard in the weeks just passed, was proclaiming repentance.

But there is something remarkable about the language of the Gospels. The word “repent” is a translation of the Greek word “metanoia,” which literally means to “turn your mind around”. “Metanoia” or “repent” means to change your mind and your heart, that is, your disposition—the way you stand before God. In other words, and as St. Paul writes in the second reading in his letter to the Corinthians, turn yourself away from that which tears down to that which builds up; away from the kingdom of man to the kingdom of God. Conversion, repentance, reconciliation inaugurate the possibility of the kingdom of heaven for us, the result of which is seen in the close of this Gospel; the restitution of the sick to health, of the blind to sight, of the dying to living. Everything that sin destroys and tears apart is restored and made new again in the kingdom of God. Just as Isaiah described the exiled Jews as walking in darkness because they were away from their homeland, so sin exiles us to a land of darkness. And just as Isaiah prophesied the great light that would restore to the Jews their

homeland, Christ is that great light that restores us to our true homeland—
heaven, our union with God.

The urgency of this message is found in the response of the fishermen, Simon and Andrew, James and John, who “immediately” left their nets and left their boat to follow the Lord. To say immediately means to say “straight away”. That is, without hesitation. What it meant here, practically speaking, was that these men, who were to become Apostles of Christ, in an instant left behind the tools of their livelihood. Simon and Andrew left their fishing nets on the ground for anyone to take, James and John not only left their boat but their father as well. This urgency should ring in our ears at the dismissal of the Mass: “Go forth, the Mass is ended”. To say “go” is hardly a polite way to farewell someone, but it is the farewell of the Priest to the faithful.

God asks a great deal of us. He asked a great deal of these four fishermen when he asked them to leave behind their livelihoods and families. As with Our Lord’s proclamation to “repent” so it is with his “immediate” call to those who will be disciples; there is no subtlety, no softening of His message, no leeway. But what God asks of us is no more than He Himself was prepared to bear and did bear in Jesus Christ. This Gospel follows on from Our Lord’s forty-days in the wilderness and the temptations of the devil. He left His livelihood and His family to serve God, His Father. He was tempted, and suffered, and endured difficulties and so is not asking of us anymore than that which He has lived through Himself and nothing for which He is not prepared to grant the necessary grace.