

HOMILY AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH
SUNDAY, JANUARY 8, 2023
MATTHEW 4:12-17
“DON’T WAIT FOR HEAVEN”

During the last 90 years or so, many presidents have had slogans about their administrations. FDR had “the New Deal”. LBJ had “the Great Society”. For Reagan, it was “Morning in America”. With Obama, it was “Hope and Change”. And Trump’s slogan was “Make America Great Again”.

As Christians, we have a far greater leader than any of those men----our Lord Jesus Christ. Did the Lord have a slogan during His earthly ministry? Not exactly. But there was a particular short sentence He used a lot in His teaching. It summed up His preaching and so, in a way, it was like a slogan. We heard it in today’s gospel lesson in Matthew 4 about the start of Jesus’ public ministry at age 30. His first sermon started with that sentence that He used a lot. We heard it just now in the gospel reading, in Matthew 4: 17---“From that time on, Jesus began to preach, saying, ‘Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand.’”

Those were the words He started His first sermon with....and He said it a lot during His ministry. So it is almost like it was His slogan----“Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

With these words, Christ talks about a kingdom. The Kingdom of heaven, sometimes also called the Kingdom of God. Who is the King of that Kingdom? Jesus Christ Himself. When will this Kingdom begin? In the far, far future, at the end of the world? Well, some aspects of this Kingdom do await the return of Christ at the end of time. But what Jesus stresses in these words is that, in its essence, the Kingdom was arriving right then as He went out preaching. Jesus preached that the Kingdom was “at hand”. It was right here, it had come! The Kingdom had arrived because the King, Jesus Himself, had arrived!

And how can we be part of this Kingdom that has already arrived? He tells us in this verse how to be part of it----“Repent!” As He preached, “Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand!”.

We commonly think of the Kingdom of heaven being something just in the future. When I was a young child growing up in rural North Dakota, attending small town churches, revivals, camp meetings, there was a gospel song that we would sing----“In the sweet bye and bye, we will walk on that beautiful shore.....” That song was true---if we walk with God now, then one

day we will walk on “that beautiful shore”. But the Kingdom is not just something in the future, in the sweet bye and bye! Christ was clear in our gospel lesson---the Kingdom is “at hand”, it’s here. It came when the King came.

The King came 2000 years ago. He defeated the enemies of the Kingdom of heaven by His death and resurrection. He is already ruling now!

One of my favorite pieces of music is Handel’s oratorio, “The Messiah”. It’s long, dramatic and wonderful. All about Christ, all the lyrics come from the Bible. It’s all about our Lord, the Messiah, the King of the Kingdom of heaven. And it’s maybe a bit sentimental for me to listen to it, because the first date for my wife, Bonnie, and me was to attend the Messiah in November of 1975 in the beautiful Rockefeller Chapel at the University of Chicago.

The most famous song in the oratorio is the Hallelujah Chorus, which just booms out in worship of Jesus Christ. There is an old custom for the audience to stand when that chorus starts---not out of respect for the composer or for the performers, but in homage to the Christ who is being sung about. This began in the 1700s when the music was still quite new. King George II of England (not King George *III* whom we Americans had a bit of a disagreement with!) attended a performance of “The Messiah”. As the Hallelujah Chorus began, he was so moved that he stood up. And, of course, because he was the king, everyone else stood up, too----and thus began the custom still often followed today.

The king of England stood up that day because he recognized something---that there was a greater king than himself! And so he stood to show homage and worship of the greatest king---Jesus Christ.

When the king stood up that day, it wasn’t to show respect for a future king, but for a present king, an already king. In the words of that Hallelujah Chorus that King George stood up for there is a quote from Revelation 11:15---“The kingdoms of this world *have become* the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ---and He shall reign forever and ever.” Note the words “have become”, not “will become”. The king and the kingdom already came 2000 years ago. Already, the kingdoms of this world have become the kingdom of Christ. Jesus Christ is already ruling His Kingdom. As Jesus preached---“the Kingdom of heaven is at hand”. It’s already here.

But when we look around us, that often doesn’t seem so obvious! The world looks out of control. But if we look at the world not just with our physical eyes, but with spiritual eyes, we start to see a deeper reality---Christ is actually already in control.

At every liturgy we boldly proclaim---“Christ is in our midst. He is and always shall be!”. That is true! And if Christ is in our midst, if the Kingdom is already here, then we Christians, the citizens of that heavenly kingdom, should be heavenly people.

Are you a Christian? Then you are a citizen of that kingdom of heaven, which means you should be heavenly and holy. Those in some (not all!) non-Orthodox churches believe you can't really become all that heavenly and holy in this life. You can't be really heavenly until you get to heaven! We Orthodox believe you don't have to wait for heaven to be heavenly. You can be heavenly now.

What's the proof? The Saints. They weren't born heavenly. But by cooperating fully with the grace of God, they became heavenly in this life. They did not wait for heaven.

We can do the same. Maybe we won't become full-blown Saints, although we could. But at least we certainly, with God's grace and our striving, can become more heavenly than we are now!

There are many aspects involved in our becoming heavenly while still on earth. We'll just glance at one in closing today: a very important aspect of all this---the sacrament of Confession. Jesus said in our gospel reading---“Repent!” Confession is our main way to repent

In Confession we come before an icon of the King, our Lord Jesus. We bend our knees or bow our head to show submission to Him. We tell Him in what ways we have failed to obey Him as King. He is a King of mercy and love----and He forgives us.

And then in the sacrament we receive advice, guidance, penance----to help us live more fully in obedience to the King of heaven. So that we can let God make us holy in the here and now, so that we don't have to wait for heaven to get heavenly.

It's essential that all of us, including priests, should go to Confession. As the New Year begins, it's a good time for each of us to evaluate how often we do so and how seriously we participate in it----or does it just become sometimes a formality?

There actually is no rule on how often to go. But our regularly going is important. Some of you are quite regular. Others go occasionally but really should go more. And some...well, once in a blue moon or maybe even haven't gone since before the last blue moon!

Regular and serious Confession is a big part of not waiting for heaven, but becoming heavenly in the here and now.

In today's gospel reading from Matthew 4, the Lord said, "Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand." And as Revelation 11:15 (and Handel!) say—"The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdom of our Lord." That's because the King came 2000 years ago and started ruling over His Kingdom. The Kingdom is here and among us; may we live as faithful citizens of that Kingdom,

May God help us become truly heavenly now---don't wait for heaven!