



SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

January 8

THE GOSPEL READING

Matthew 4:12-17

[Repentance and the Kingdom]

At that time, when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee; and leaving Nazareth he went and dwelt in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: "The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, toward the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles, the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned." From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

THE SERMON

Repentance is the key that opens the door to the Kingdom of Heaven. It is the narrow road that leads there, and it is the beginning, middle, and end of our journey. It is no accident that Saint John the Baptist and our Lord Jesus Christ started their ministries with the words, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!"

After Saint John the Forerunner had appeared in the desert preaching repentance, Jesus came to him to be baptized. On the Feast of Epiphany (meaning "manifestation"), also called Theophany (meaning a visible "manifestation of God" to humankind), the Trinity was revealed. The heavens were opened, and the Spirit of God descended like a dove upon Christ. The voice of the Father came from heaven, saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." The Holy Trinity was manifested at this moment, through God's



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love for us, at the very beginning of the Son's earthly ministry.

The ministry of Christ was preaching the Gospel by words and deeds. On a journey leading to the Cross in Jerusalem and culminating in the Resurrection. While the Lord visited different areas and journeyed to Jerusalem at least three separate times for the feast of Passover, His ministry was based in Galilee, where He grew up. In the New Testament, we read about a few cities there, including Nazareth and Capernaum. These places, with their holy sites, are still there and can be visited today.

At the time of Christ, the region of Galilee had a mixed population of Jewish and non-Jewish people who did not worship the God of Israel. As such, the Lord Jesus' ministry from the beginning brought the light of the Gospel to both peoples. As the Prophet Isaiah said, "Galilee of the Gentiles, a people who walk in darkness behold a great light; and you who dwell in the country of the shadow of death, upon you a light will shine."

Jesus says, "I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness but have the light of life." The appearance of our Savior Jesus Christ abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel. As He appeared and began His ministry, He taught us to embark on the road to repentance. It is a road that leads us away from selfishness and toward God. Repentance, from the Greek word "metanoia" (μετάνοια), means a change of mind, a change of heart, a transformation of our purpose, our vision, and a reorientation towards loving others and loving God more fully. Saint Gregory Palamas says, "Repentance means hating sin and loving virtue, turning away from evil and doing good ... being penitent before God, fleeing to Him for refuge with a contrite heart, and casting ourselves into the ocean of His mercy."

In Baptism, we are reborn, which is the beginning of our life story. Repentance is the compass that leads us to the right destination. It is our spiritual journey. Turning to Christ is how we participate daily in God's redemptive work. As we grow into the likeness of God, we begin to imitate or resemble Christ in His virtue and love. We begin to bear the image of immortality, of the heavenly Father. This is done through prayer, constant awareness of the presence of the Lord who loves us, and participation in the sacramental life of the Church.

The Lord Jesus Christ is the incarnate Word of God, so it is fitting that He begins His public ministry with the words of eternal life. The "Kingdom of Heaven" (which we also call the "Kingdom of God") is present in Christ, and to live in the presence of Christ is to live in that Kingdom. In this way, there is both an "already" and a "not yet" in our lives. For the Kingdom is *already* with us in Christ, we experience the Kingdom in the Church, but it is yet to come in Christ's Second Coming. Then the eternal day will dawn, and God will transform all things into the New Heaven and the New Earth. We experience that coming glory now most profoundly in the Divine Liturgy, where we are present with Christ in an intimate way. Saint John the Baptist announced that the Kingdom of Heaven was coming, and now Christ says the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand – it is here, and it starts

with Him.

Repentance and the Kingdom both mean rejection of “the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life” (1 John 2:16). Such are the very things with which the enemy tried to tempt our Lord during His forty days in the wilderness. He did not need to repent because He cannot and does not sin. Therefore, following Him, as He calls us to do, is always the way to turn to the road to eternal life because He will never lead us anywhere else. By union with Him and yielding ourselves to the Holy Spirit, we receive His grace to turn away from sin and anything that keeps us away from God.

Repentance is a journey, so it is not something that we fully achieve and finish at some point in this life. It is a constant striving, a life-long opening of the heart to Christ and others, and a rejection of selfish and sinful things. Even the great saints of God often realized that they had only begun to repent. Saint Maria of Paris, on the occasion of the grief she experienced with the death of her sister, said, “I still do not know the meaning of repentance, but now I am shocked at my own insignificance . . . I want an authentic and purified road . . . No amount of thought will ever result in any greater formulation than the three words, ‘Love one another,’ so long as it is love to the end and without exceptions. And then the whole of life is illumined.”

We always rejoice in hope, for Christ is with us and has brought us into His Kingdom. He brings us into that Kingdom every time we celebrate the Divine Liturgy, which is why we begin with the words, “Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, now and forever and to the ages of ages.” The Kingdom comes to us – that is, Christ comes to us – and we mystically enter the Kingdom in the Liturgy, which culminates with our union with Christ and one another as we receive His Body and Blood in the Eucharist.

This union with God through Jesus Christ continues in our daily lives through faith, love, prayers, and service. It continues as we open ourselves to the love of God through repentance. A great Light has shone in the world and in our hearts – let us be diligent to never hide this light “under a basket.” We are the light of the world, and it is our joy and privilege to let our light so shine before others so that they may see our good works and glorify our Father in heaven.

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