

Gospel reading for Sunday 26th January 2020

[Matthew 4:12-23](#)

Happy new year!

The gospel reading for this week is Matthew 4:12-23 and recounts the commencement of Jesus' ministry. The reading provides a great focus for the beginning of the year as we reflect on our mission in Lutheran education communities for 2020.

This passage begins with the relocation of Jesus to Galilee after the arrest of John the Baptist. Galilee is the northernmost territory of Israel and considered to be the home of the more unsophisticated Jews and many non-Jewish inhabitants or Gentiles. It is not the centre of religious thinking and practice. It is also not quite the location that God's promised Messiah might be expected to commence his ministry. It seems that with Jesus, we are to expect the unexpected.

Jesus begins his preaching with a call for people to, "Repent of your sins and turn to God, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near." The call for repentance is often used by street preachers as an admonishment to live a holy life or face God's eternal judgement, however the word 'repent' may not fully capture the meaning of the original language.

When Jesus calls us to 'repent' he is calling us to a whole new way of thinking and a complete change of mind. Rolf Jacobsen from the *Working preacher* suggests it could be interpreted as Jesus calling us to "Wrap your mind around this!" To turn to God, for his love for you is so much more than you may have expected.

The word 'kingdom' is used here and appears twice in this gospel reading. Jesus proclaims the 'kingdom of heaven' and Jesus proclaimed 'the good news about the kingdom'. What do these kingdom ideas really mean for us today? Phrases that contain kingdom appear eighty two times in the gospels (Evans, R 2018). It seems it is an important concept. Jesus talked about it often and used many stories or parables to help reveal the mystery of this kingdom.

Today we can struggle to understand the imagery of a kingdom. It can evoke very negative ideas of domination, privilege, exclusion and hierarchical control. However, the kingdom that Jesus teaches about is not like worldly kingdoms that we expect that rely on wealth, power and strength for their might. It is also not otherworldly and a distant heavenly realm.

The kingdom that Jesus teaches about is radically different to what we expect and is all about relationships and God's gracious love. Jesus' kingdom is centred in mercy, kindness, humility and empowering love. In this kingdom the unexpected happens; the lost are found, the outcast is welcomed, the wounded are healed and the last become the first. Jesus' kingdom calls very ordinary people, such as the fisherman, to follow him and empowers them to do extraordinary things.

Jesus did not only teach about the kingdom but revealed it in who he was and how he lived and in doing so revealed the loving heart of God. In Jesus, God's immense love for all people is revealed and everything is made new. The kingdom is not a distant reality but very here and now and also created within us.

How do we engage with this kingdom thinking in Lutheran education communities?

We do so when we challenge misconceptions that Christianity is just about 'being good' or living certain values instead of the radical message of God's gracious love for each one of us.

We do so when we challenge the kingdom of the world that suggests that strength, power, possessions and wealth are markers of our worth and success.

We do so when our communities are places of vibrant discussions and action around issues of justice, peace, mercy and equity.

We do so when our communities not only learn about the God who loves all people but experience that love in unexpected ways.

It is my prayer that the Jesus' teaching of the radical nature of the kingdom and the heart of God will inspire your community this year to expect the unexpected.

Every blessing as you begin your year together.

Anne