

## SERMON AT COVENTRY CATHEDRAL MATTHEW 4: 12-33

May I speak in the name of the Father Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

“Jesus began to preach” (Mt 4:17). With these words, the evangelist Matthew introduces the ministry of Jesus. The One who is the Word of God has come to speak with us, in his own words and by his own life. Today’s Gospel (Mt 4:12-23) helps us to know how, where and to whom Jesus began to preach.

1. How did he begin? With a very simple phrase: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (v. 17). This is the main message of all Jesus’ sermons: to tell us that the kingdom of heaven is at hand. What does this mean? The kingdom of heaven means the reign of God, that is, the way in which God reigns through his relationship with us. Jesus tells us that the kingdom of heaven is at hand, that God is near. Here is the novelty, the first message: God is not far from us. The One who dwells in heaven has come down to earth; he became man. He has torn down walls and shortened distances. We ourselves did not deserve this: he came down to meet us. Now this nearness of God to his people is one of the ways he has done things since the beginning, even of the Old Testament. He said to his people: “Imagine: what nation has its gods so near to it as I am near to you?” (cf. Dt 4:7). And this nearness became flesh in Jesus.

This is a joyful message: God came to visit us in person, by becoming man. He did not embrace our human condition out of duty, no, but out of love. For love, he took on our human nature, for one embraces what one loves. God took our human nature because he loves us and desires freely to give us the salvation that, alone and unaided, we cannot hope to attain. He wants to stay with us and give us the beauty of life, peace of heart, the joy of being forgiven and feeling loved.

“Repent”, in other words, “Change your life”. Change your life, for a new way of living has begun. The time when you lived for yourself is over; now is the time for living with and for God, with and for others, with and for love. Today Jesus speaks those same words to you: “Take heart, I am here with you, allow me to enter and your life will change”. Jesus knocks at the door. That is why the Lord gives you his word, so that you can receive it like a love letter he has written to you, to help you realize that he is at your side. His word consoles and encourages us. At the same time it challenges us, frees us from the bondage of our selfishness and summons us to conversion. Because his word has the power to change our lives and to lead us out of darkness into the light. This is the power of his word.

Here is Jesus’ invitation: God has come close to you; recognize his presence, make room for his Word, and you will change your outlook on life. So, brothers and sisters, we can ask ourselves: Where does my life find direction, from where does it draw its orientation? From the many “words” I hear, from ideologies, or from the Word of God that guides and purifies me? What are the aspects in me that require change and conversion? – the Word of God, which is addressed to everyone and calls us to conversion, makes us heralds. This is the dynamism of the Word: it draws us into the “net” of the Father’s love and makes us apostles moved by an unquenchable desire to bring all those we encounter into the barque of the Kingdom.

Today let us also hear the invitation to be fishers of men: let us feel that we are called by Jesus in person to proclaim his Word, to bear witness to it in everyday life, to live it in justice and charity, called to “give it flesh” by tenderly caring for those who suffer. This is our mission: to become seekers of the lost, oppressed and discouraged, not to bring them ourselves, but the consolation of the Word, the disruptive proclamation of God that transforms life, to bring the joy of knowing that He is our Father and addresses each one of us, to bring the beauty of saying, “Brother, sister, God has come close to you, listen and you will find in his Word an amazing gift!”

2. If we consider where Jesus started his preaching, we see that he began from the very places that were then thought to be “in darkness”. Both the first reading and the Gospel speak to us of people who “sat in the region and shadow of death”. Yet Jesus started from there: not from the forecourt of the temple of Jerusalem, but from the opposite side of the country. He started from a periphery.

Here there is a message for us: the word of salvation does not go looking for untouched, clean and safe places. Instead, it enters the complex and obscure places in our lives. Now, as then, God wants to visit the very places we think he will never go. Yet how often we are the ones who close the door, preferring to keep our confusion, our dark side and our duplicity hidden. In the same way, he is not afraid to explore the terrain of our hearts and to enter the roughest and most difficult corners of our lives. He knows that his mercy alone can heal us, his presence alone can transform us and his word alone can renew us. So let us open the winding paths of our hearts – those paths we have inside us that we do not wish to see or that we hide

In short, Jesus ‘reaches out’ to tell us that God’s mercy is for everyone. Let us not forget this: God’s mercy is for everyone, for each one of us. Each person can say, “God’s mercy is for me”.

3. Finally, to whom did Jesus begin to speak? The Gospel says that, “as he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon who is called Peter and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen. And he said to them, ‘Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men’” (Mt 4:18-19). The first people to be called were fishermen: not people carefully chosen for their abilities or devout people at prayer in the temple, but ordinary working people.

Let us think about what Jesus said to them: I will make you fishers of men. He was speaking to fishermen, using the language they understood. Their lives changed on the spot. He called them where they were and as they were, in order to make them sharers in his mission. “Immediately they left their nets and followed him” (v. 20). Why immediately? Simply because they felt drawn. They did not hurry off because they had received an order, but because they were drawn by love. To follow Jesus, mere good works are not enough; we have to listen daily to his call. He, who alone knows us and who loves us fully, leads us to put out into the deep of life. Just as he did with the disciples who heard him.

That is why we need his word: so that we can hear, amid the thousands of other words in our daily lives, that one word that speaks to us not about things, but about life.

This is what happened with the first disciples (cf. Jn 1:40-42). But sooner or later, the moment comes in which it is necessary to leave so as to follow (cf. Lk 11:27-28). That is when it is necessary to make a decision: Shall I leave behind some certainties and embark on a new adventure, or shall I remain like I am? This is a decisive moment for every Christian because the meaning of everything else is at stake here. If someone does not find the courage to set out on the journey, the risk is to remain a spectator of one's own existence and to live the faith halfway.

To stay with Jesus, therefore, requires the courage to leave, to set out on the journey. I leave these things behind to move forward, leave behind what holds us back from living fully. How beautiful it would be to leave all this in order to experience, for example, the tiring but rewarding risk of service, or to dedicate time to prayer so as to grow in friendship with the Lord. I am also thinking of a young family who leaves behind a quiet life to open themselves up to the unpredictable and beautiful adventure of motherhood and fatherhood. It is a sacrifice, but all it takes is one look at a child to understand that it was the right choice to leave behind certain rhythms and comforts to have this joy. I am also thinking, of certain professionals, for example, doctors or healthcare workers, who give up a lot of free time to study and prepare themselves, and who do good, dedicating many hours day and night, and spend so much physical and mental energy for the sick. I think of workers who leave behind convenience, who let go of doing nothing so as to put food on the table. In short, to live life, we need to accept the challenge to leave. Today, Jesus extends this invitation to each of us.

So, I leave you with a question about this. First of all: Can I remember a "strong moment" in which I have already encountered Jesus? Each of us can recall our own story – in my life, has there been a significant moment when I encountered Jesus? And, is there something beautiful and significant that happened in my life because of which I left other less important things? And today, is there something Jesus asks me to give up? What are the material things, ways of thinking, attitudes I need to leave behind so as to truly say "yes"? May Mary help us to respond with a total "yes" to God, like she did, to know what to leave behind so as to follow him better. Do not be afraid to leave if it is to follow Jesus. We will always find that we are better.