The Holy Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ According to Matthew (4:12-23)

When Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

“Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,
on the road by 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 proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

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 fish for people.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

The Gospel of the Lord!

Praise to you Lord Christ!
On Friday, we inaugurated the 45th president of these United States. On Saturday, hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets, marching in protest. On Sunday, Jesus shows up proclaiming the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.

The Church has, for some time, avoided politics from the pulpit. We would like to focus on the part of Jesus’ message that calls for a change of heart, a movement of grace, within each person. While encountering a risen savior almost always leads to such a change, it does not stop there. There is something corporate about salvation—something political.

To that end, Paul wrote to the Church in Corinth in disbelief that rival schools had formed within the Body of Christ. Some said they belonged Paul and others to Peter, some to Trump and others to Obama, some to Republicans and others to Democrats. Into the fractures and fissures of a Church deeply divided, Paul asked, “What about the cross? Do you remember the cross? You’re to be united because Jesus died for all of you and not one of you deserved it.”

Our American context has not helped on several fronts, leading to our neglect of the politics of Jesus. Early on in the American experiment, the Great Awakenings swept through our nation in parallel with the rise of individualism, resulting in a deeply personal Christianity in which conversion experience was valued over all else. Then our love of efficiency—our need to know the bottom line—has resulted in a Christianity that thinks being saved has to do with the afterlife.

Matthew hasn’t helped with our heaven obsession. It’s been our preferred Gospel for some time. And it seems Jesus talks about heaven nonstop in Matthew. Except we forget that he’s talking about the Kingdom of Heaven. And we must know that
the Kingdom of Heaven is not a place. Jesus is not preaching heaven! The other three Gospels, besides Matthew, phrase it better. Jesus heals the sick, eats with sinners, and proclaims **Kingdom of God** is at hand. The Spanish translation of this phrase assists our understanding: El Reino de Dios. The reign of God is here, says Jesus!

Our American context has also hurt us because here we confuse the Kingdom of God, or the Reign of God, with the United States of America. You’ll find in this sanctuary two flags, one belonging to the Episcopal Church and one belonging to this country, forcing the cross that hangs in the middle to compete with both. Our loyalty is divided at best; at worst, we think that somehow the US is favored by God as a nation compared to other countries, which is an affront to the politics of Jesus, as if Jesus did not die for all. We must choose our politics.

The Gospel has traveled far to get to us and some things have blurred in our memories along the way. Over the centuries, we have allowed the politics of Jesus to fade out of our reality as a people. Something shifted in the 4th century. We can thank Constantine for convincing the Church to baptize an empire, thus forsaking the politics of Jesus for the politics of Rome, or London, or Williamsburg, or Washington.

But from the beginning, the Gospel has been political. The very word Gospel, or Good News, *euangelion* in Greek, was the exact same term used by messengers of the Emperor in the 1st century to proclaim a new decree. It was called Good News, or Gospel. I imagine a local representative, sent by the governor, declaring a new reality that was spoken by the Emperor. This representative, probably wanting everyone to hear, would raise up a scroll, walk to the middle of a crowd, and declare, “The Gospel of our Emperor Caesar Augustus according to Governor Lucius Saturninus.” Naturally, when early Christians decided to write down the
story of their King, the Prince of Peace, and the Reign of God, they called it Gospel.

There is also the word Church, which in Greek is *ecclesia*. It’s the same word, exactly, used to describe a political gathering or meeting in the 1st century Roman world. At some point, I imagine early Christians must have debated what they would call their gatherings. Sometimes it’s decided for you. You can imagine the conversation:

One says, “What shall we call it?”

Another responds, “I heard back East they just call it “The Way.”

“That’s not bad.”

“Call it what it is,” another chimes in, “It’s an ecclesia.”

“Ok. Ok. We’ll call it Church.”

It’s always been political. The crown of thorns was not just mockery. Jesus was executed by capital punishment—executed by the state because some were claiming he was king. Better to kill one man than risk losing all the people to his cause. Like I said, Friday, we inaugurated a new president; Saturday, protesters took to the streets; and Sunday, Jesus shows up proclaiming the Reign of God is here and you’re invited.

Too often, in The Episcopal Church, we dance around the most profound parts of our faith, hoping that our rich liturgy and music will convey the message that has brought us here in the first place. I would like to make it abundantly clear this morning, that regardless of where you are on your journey, Jesus is calling you right now to life as a citizen of God’s kingdom. Jesus is calling you to follow him, to be his disciple, and to share that Good News to the ends of the earth.
We invite you to join the fellowship of the saints here at Bruton Parish Church. If you’re here and you have not joined the Church, then consider making your relationship official so we can know you better and serve at your side. If you are joining us from another tradition, we would like to receive you into this church with the laying on of hands by the bishop. If you’ve never been baptized, then the waters of new life are calling through which you die with Christ and are raised with him in new life. Consider making public the movement of God in your life. If you’ve done all of those things already, then perhaps today you claim your discipleship anew and start thinking of yourself as a citizen in the Kingdom where God reigns.

When we talk about the Reign of God and the politics of Jesus, we are talking about organizing ourselves in a community that journeys through life together, where burdens can be shared as we strive to serve God through one another. It’s a community that prioritizes being in relationship over being right all the time, where our suffering is redeemed by the suffering of Christ on the cross. We are fed and nourished with the spiritual food and drink of the Kingdom. We gather to pray for friends and enemies alike, knowing that we, ourselves, are friends to some and enemies to others. We give up warmongering for peacemaking, cynicism for gratitude, the politics of fear and scarcity for those of hope and the abundance of God’s love. Won’t you join us as disciples of Jesus Christ?

Oh, there’s one other thing, I almost forgot, you might want to know that being a disciple is the hardest thing you will ever do. It will cost you your entire life. It will change the way you work or even what job you do. It will change how you are a parent and a spouse and a friend. There will be long days and sleepless nights. It will be the hardest, most beautiful life you can imagine.
Perhaps discipleship is best summarized in the words of a hymn which we will sing during Communion. You know, during Communion we are being made one as a people through the Body and Blood of Christ, and singing together at that time helps to shape us into a unified ecclesia. So in a few minutes, grab your hymnal, check your bulletin for the hymn numbers, and lift your voices up with the saints. If you do, you’ll sing these words in hymn 661 about life in the Kingdom of God, and they might just become your words today:

_They cast their nets in Galilee_
_just off the hills of brown;_
_such happy, simple fisherfolk,_
_before the Lord came down._

_Contented, peaceful fishermen,_
_before they ever knew_
_the peace of God that filled their hearts_
_brimful, and broke them too._

_Young John who trimmed the flapping sail,_
_homeless in Patmos died,_
_Peter, who hauled the teeming net,_
_head-down was crucified._

_The peace of God, it is no peace,_
_but strife closed in the sod,_
_Yet let us pray for but one thing --_
_the marvelous peace of God._