

Matthew 4:12-17

“Light in the darkness”

Now when Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, He departed to Galilee. And leaving Nazareth, He came and dwelt in Capernaum, which is by the sea, in the regions of Zebulun and Naphtali, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah the prophet, saying: “The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, by the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles: The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and upon those who sat in the region and shadow of death Light has dawned.” From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

We tend to think, as Orthodox followers of Jesus Christ in this ‘post-modern’ time of scientific and technological advancement, of great moral and social change that has challenged and successfully replaced faith in Christ in Europe; that, as it sweeps into our land, and we face these challenges, we must surely live in the most confusing of times. And with confusion always comes sin – or at best distraction. And these are indeed hallmarks of our age.

The reality however is that the kingdom of Heaven has always been more than difficult to find and more that confusing to live. In fact it has been – and continues to be – impossible to find and impossible to live without repentance-born, *and* borne, faith.

We see in the Gospel account today the people of Jesus time lived in times just as, and maybe more confusing than today. Just like us today, Jesus must begin his teaching helping the people understand what the kingdom of heaven *is* because it is invisible to those who are not actively following God with whatever light He has given them. And in fact the light they do have in the Law of Moses, while it is the light of God, as I’ve noted before – it is not the kingdom of heaven but rather a way to the kingdom if it is followed, as it is by some, (as we see in Heb. 11 with the righteous OT believers), with repentance-borne faith in Him.

But Jesus understands how confusing it is for them. God’s chosen people are clearly under judgment, being as they are, occupied and subjugated by the Romans. And the rulers of Israel they do have, like the long list of unrighteous kings of the past, are no better, and in fact, *worse* than their occupiers. It wasn’t the Romans who slaughtered the 14,000 Innocents or who imprisoned John the great Forerunner and Baptist of Christ. It was Herod the ruler of the Jews.

The guardians of the light of the Law of Moses keep the external regulations of the Law, which are those things that are seen, but have no awareness, and really no concern whatsoever for the light or spirit of the Law. They won’t break the Law outwardly in ways that can be seen, but the inner aspect of the Law, the spirit or light of the Law that can only be kept in our minds and hearts, as far as they’re concerned, because they cannot be seen – do not exist.

And so, like today, sin reigns. And where sin reigns – confusion increases – described here as darkness. And what we find in every age, in every place, is that people living in darkness will choose one of three paths: they will either succumb to sin and simply embrace the darkness, or they will push back the darkness and find the Light, or they will learn to live in the darkness by finding what they think is an answer to the darkness. In

other words, instead of investing their focus and resources in finding and living in the light – they seek to make sense of the darkness. To quell and calm the confusion through the power of knowledge. Their knowledge.

The seen world in which we live, almost all of it, is the sum of these two paths: either the darkness of sin, or this effort to live in the darkness and make sense of the confusion. We all know and can see the sin in our world: the violence, the moral decay, the increasing fear, the self-centeredness and greed and pride that seem to have no boundaries.

But what of the other, what of those who've resisted this but do not struggle to find the light, but rather simply learn to live in the darkness – who struggle to make sense of the confusion? This pursuit of 'human knowledge as light' can be seen in virtually every aspect of the world in which we live.

In our Christ-less philanthropy. We'll help each other – without God. In our Christ-less politics. We'll govern ourselves – without Christ. And this is any position where the answer to the darkness is not the Light! Not simply inspired by the Light - but Thee Light of Jesus Christ.

In our Christ-less families. Where we love and help each other – without Christ. Where happiness and security replace truth. And my personal favorite, in Christ-less religion – even Christian religion – where Christ is replaced by the Bible or theology or Tradition instead of experienced through these things and concepts.

And I have to say, the danger within the Orthodox Church with the richness of our all encompassing Tradition is this very thing: to lose Christ *in* the Tradition. To give up the struggle for the Light and learn instead to use the Tradition as a way of living in the darkness. That is, of using the Church and her 'answers' to the darkness, as a means of living in the darkness rather than as a way to the Light – for which they were given.

Because at the end of the day, this learning to live in the darkness is anything in which we find significance, anything that gives our life meaning or purpose or happiness that is not a means for experiencing Christ, that is not a rejection of the darkness and struggle for the Light.

This is why Jesus spent so much of His time teaching what the kingdom of Heaven was...So we would know what the Light is and how to find it. And this is why the Evangelists that wrote the Gospels give us these details of the life of Jesus and the world in which He lived rather than just a list of do's and don'ts – so we would know how to live in the Kingdom of Heaven. Not just when we die - but now, in this life. Finding the Light in this darkness.

Then, as now, this can only be done through repentance. I said at the beginning, finding and living the kingdom of Heaven is impossible – and indeed it is. We can not do it. We can not make it appear. It is withheld from us. And yet, as Jesus will soon teach, it is also inside of us. As I've said so many times, it is a door to heaven that God has created in man that can only be opened from the inside - by God. Repentance is nothing more, and nothing less, than knocking on the door of Heaven. We can not open the door, but we don't need to because if we knock, He will open it up to us – always, always has and He always, always will. Repentance leads us to the Light. And as we say in our doxology every day: “in the Light shall we see light.”

This “Great Light that has appeared,” Jesus Christ, experienced in the world today most directly in His Church, is the only answer to the darkness, the only way out of the darkness and therefore the only real way to live in the world. The passions that we struggle to dispel are nothing more than the stones of the path that have become boulders and barriers on the path instead of the smooth rocks of the path. This path to the door, this way out of the darkness is with us, and in us, as long as we live. The good news of today’s reading and indeed of the Gospel, is exactly this: in Jesus Christ as often as we repent, the kingdom of Heaven is at hand!