

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

In life, people divide over the most futile reasons. Families split over things they later struggle to explain. Friends fall out over misunderstandings that a simple, honest conversation could have prevented. Communities fracture into camps, “my people” and “your people,” over preferences, pride, old wounds.

Then, when something bad really does happen, people who won’t share a table will share a task. History is full of this: fierce rivals teaming up when a bigger threat appears. Under pressure, enemies become partners.

Athens and Sparta distrusted each other, yet when the Persian Empire pressed in, they became allies. Rome did it too: Caesar, Pompey, and Crassus in the First Triumvirate; later Octavian, Antony, and Lepidus in the Second. Temporary unity driven by survival and ambition.

The Middle Ages saw rival states cooperate through marriage alliances; Castile and Aragon aligned when greater threats loomed. The Renaissance refined the art: Machiavelli and soft diplomacy in fragile Italian states. In the Italian Wars, Venice, Florence, Milan, Naples, and the Papal States formed leagues and shifted alliances between France and the Habsburg powers, paying the price of investing more in Raphael and Michelangelo than in defense.

The great European empires repeated the pattern: Britain, France, Spain, sometimes foes, rarely friends. Even the American War of Independence carries the instinct: “We cannot assist” until the words “it concerns the English,” and suddenly ships are prepared by the French. And in the 20th century, the United States found itself allied with the Communist Soviet Union against Nazi Germany. Hostilities set aside against a worse enemy.

So yes, people can unite. Often it takes a crisis. Often unity is the result of fear: we stop fighting each other because we have to fight our enemy. This brings us to today’s Gospel, where Jesus offers a different kind of unity. Now things get better. It is not unity by fear, not unity by a shared enemy, not unity for convenience. It is unity by light. Unity by following.

Matthew opens with a sentence that tells us what the temperature of his world is like: “When Jesus heard that John had been arrested...” This is no footnote. John’s arrest means the door slamming made too much noise. The powers of that world are not neutral to Christ’s message. Speaking the truth has consequences. Jesus’ message has enormous, and dangerous, potential.

Jesus’ next move matters: he withdraws to Galilee. Some might misread this as fear. Matthew shows strategy, timing, and purpose. Jesus is not panicking; he is calculating. He begins not at the center of political control, not yet, but in a region of mixed identity and complicated history.

This is extremely good news for us. Many of us think we can begin again only when life is calm and under control. But Jesus shows us we can also begin in the middle of pressure. If you

walked into St. John's today carrying pressure, emotional, financial, or otherwise, remember Matthew's first note: you are not disqualified. This is where the kingdom can begin.

Matthew is specific: Jesus leaves Nazareth and moves to Capernaum, by the sea, in the land of Zebulun and Naphtali. Then he quotes the prophet: "the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light." Matthew is telling us God makes real promises in real places. Galilee was not the obvious place: not the capital, but a rural place of mixture and compromise, sometimes looked down on. Yet that's where the light goes.

Jesus does not begin with the most important people, or with those who already feel spiritually and socially secure. He goes to those who think God has forgotten them. How many times have we thought: "God, have you forgotten me?" It is at these times that the light rises.

There is also a quiet challenge: if Jesus chooses to begin with the margins, then his Church cannot love the center alone. If Jesus is drawn to the overlooked, then following him will draw us to them too. Then Matthew gives us Jesus' first proclamation: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This is essentially my whole sermon in one line, but let's slow it down.

The "kingdom of heaven" means God's reign, God's rule, God's will being done, not merely heaven later. This is God's life breaking into this earth in his incarnate Son. The kingdom is not only where we go when we die. It is the power we live under now: a different way of being human, a different authority, a different center.

And that matters for unity, because what divides people most deeply isn't just personality; it's that they serve different kings, different ideas, different kingdoms. That kingdom "has come near", that is pure grace. God's reign is not distant and treacherous to reach. It is near us, within reach, so close we can respond to it, confront it, and be comforted by it. We have full access to it.

Then comes "repent". Repentance is the natural response to nearness. If you see it as shame, you'll flee; if you see it as re-orientation, you'll recognize mercy. It is waking up and realizing we don't have to keep going this way. Repentance is the gift of a new direction.

And it is not only for bad people, but for everyone who has been living off-center, for anyone who feels lost. It is the ongoing act of bringing your life back onto the track that leads to God. Immediately, Matthew gives us repentance in action as Jesus calls his disciples. He sees Simon Peter and Andrew fishing and says: "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." This is the first time Jesus gathers a community, and the call has two parts.

First: "Follow me". Christianity is not merely about following rules; it is about following a person. That is how the Christian faith can unify people who are very different, because our center is not our culture, our class, our politics, or our preferences. The center is Jesus. Where Jesus is the center, there can be true diversity without disintegration. Second: "I will make

you". Jesus is not saying, improve yourself and then you can belong. He is saying, come with me, and I will shape you. Discipleship is not self-manufacture, but proximity to our Lord.

Matthew underlines it with one amazing word: "immediately". They leave their nets, and they follow. Immediately. Then James and John, mending nets with their father, receive the same call and give the same response. Also notice: the first disciples were not religious professionals. They were ordinary working people. Jesus meets them in routine, not in the temple, but while they are working. We don't have to leave our humanity behind to follow him. We follow him as we are.

And "following" always means leaving something: nets, livelihood, security, control; the boat, stability, familiarity. James and John even leave their father, not out of cruelty, but as a sign of deep loyalty to Jesus. Christ does not want you to abandon your beloved; he wants you to re-order your life around him. Yes, it is costly. But the things we cling to also cost us. Nets can become chains and boats can become prisons. Freedom is always costly.

"Fish for people" can sound strange, but here it means gathering. Jesus is starting a movement that gathers everyone into God's kingdom, not by force or propaganda, but through proclamation, compassion, and presence. The disciples are drawn into Jesus' work: bringing people into the light, into healing, hope, and a new community.

And here we return to unity: not unity because we are scared, but unity because we have been called, not by a common enemy, but by a common Lord. Matthew ends with a summary: Jesus goes throughout Galilee to teach, to proclaim the good news of the kingdom, and to heal. This is the shape of the kingdom: truth, hope, mercy that touches bodies, minds, and relationships.

Jesus came in human form to restore. So, he calls us to learn truth, speak hope, and practise healing through prayer, presence, service, and love. This is how we make the Church a sign of his kingdom. So how should we leave church this morning? My humble suggestion is three concrete turns, grounded in the text: turn from "spectator faith" to "following faith"; turn from fear-based unity to Christ centered unity; and turn from clinging to nets to trusting the one Lord. Unity is great, but it should not come out of convenience; it should come out of love, God's love.

History shows we can unite if the threat is big enough. But the Gospel offers a better foundation than fear. It says a light has dawned, a kingdom is at hand, and a voice still says: "Follow me." When we follow, we are not just temporarily cooperative. We become, by grace, people walking in one direction behind the Lord, learning his truth, living his hope, and becoming a sign of his healing. Let's not wait until the next crisis to remember what matters.

*Amen.*