

JANUARY 5 FATHER FRANCIS SALASAR

A tourist, driving through the countryside, came upon a farmer sitting peacefully on his porch. Pulling over, the tourist asked, “Can you tell me the quickest way to the next town?”

The farmer thought for a moment and asked, “Are you walking or driving?”
“Driving,” the tourist replied.

The farmer nodded and said, “Well, that is definitely the quickest.”

Sometimes, the most direct answer is the clearest, even if it challenges our expectations for complexity. In today’s Gospel, Jesus begins his public ministry with a message of stunning simplicity and directness. He doesn’t offer a lengthy theological treatise, but a single, powerful proclamation: **“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”** In this one sentence lies the entire program of his mission—a message that is at once an invitation, a warning, and a promise of hope.

Matthew sets the stage with deliberate purpose. Jesus begins his work not in the religious hub of Jerusalem or the political seat of Rome, but in Capernaum, in the regions of Zebulun and Naphtali. This was a backwater territory, a place the prophet Isaiah described as being “in darkness” and “in the land of the shadow of death.”

This is our first crucial point: **The light of Christ shines first and most brightly in the darkest places.** Jesus deliberately enters the world of shadows—the shadows of political oppression, economic hardship, and spiritual despair. This is our first glimpse of hope: God does not wait for us to clean ourselves up and come to him. He steps directly into the mess and confusion of our lives, meeting us where we are, not where we pretend to be.

Secondly, the word we hear is **“Repent.”** The moment we hear the word ‘repent’, we often imagine a call to feel guilty or ashamed. But the Greek word Jesus uses, *metanoia*, means something far more profound. It means a

fundamental change of mind, a transformative shift of heart and direction. It is not a call to misery, but a call to wake up.

So, Repentance is not about punishment; it is about possibility. It is the conscious decision to stop walking down paths that lead to emptiness, fear, and sin, and to turn toward the source of light, life, and grace. It is God's invitation to stop chasing what is fleeting and to orient our entire being toward what is eternal.

Why this urgent call to turn around? Jesus provides the reason: **“for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”** This is the explosive core of his message. The Kingdom is not a distant, future reality or a mere post-death destination. In the very person of Jesus, God's reign is breaking into the present moment. Heaven is touching earth. The healing, forgiving, and restoring power of God is now active and accessible.

This nearness is what gives the call to repent its urgency. The King is here; the door is open. To refuse to turn is to choose to remain in the shadows when the light is already shining.

The Gospel tells us that people from all over—Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, and beyond the Jordan—flocked to Jesus. They came with diseases, pains, demonic torments, and paralysis. They came because they encountered in Jesus a hope they had never tasted before—a kingdom made manifest not in power and judgment, but in compassion, healing, and mercy.

What does this mean for us today? We live in a world not so different from first-century Galilee. Our shadows have modern names: anxiety about the future, wounds from the past, the weight of regret, the ache of loneliness. Into this world, Jesus steps and speaks the same foundational word: **“Repent.”** He is saying, “Let your heart turn toward me again.”

And he gives the same glorious reason: **“For the kingdom of heaven has come near.”** He is declaring, “God is closer than you think. Grace is more available than you imagine. The healing you long for is within your reach.”

He makes this kingdom tangible for us now, just as he did then:

- In the **Eucharist**, he feeds us with his own life.
- In **Confession**, he breaks the chains of our past.
- In **Scripture**, he speaks truth into our confusion.
- In the **Christian community**, he strengthens us for the journey.

As a conclusion, we return to that tourist and the farmer. The farmer's answer was simple, but it required the tourist to already be on the right mode of travel. Jesus' message is simple, but it requires us to make a fundamental choice about how we are travelling through life.

So dear brothers and sisters, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" is not a threat from an angry God, but the clearest, most direct guidance from a loving one. He is pointing to the only true and "quickest way" to the life we were made for.

The call is not to a single moment of guilt, but to a lifetime of turning, of reorienting ourselves toward his light. The Kingdom is not a distant prize, but a present reality. Therefore, let us have the courage to turn away from the shadows of our own making. Let us turn toward the one who is already near, and in turning, discover that the path to peace, purpose, and eternal life has been open to us all along.