

Kuhl, Steven: Business As Usual And The Unusual Business Of Jesus

Business as Usual and the Unusual Business of Jesus (Matthew 4:12-23)

Step 1 – Business as Usual: *Fisherman*. On the surface, Peter and Andrew, James and John are the picture of business as usual. As fishermen, they cast their nets to make a living and mend them as they get torn in the process. But that appearance of normality is the problem. For something BIG is emerging in the insignificant corner of the world: Zebulun and Naphtali. Jesus is there with big messianic claims (“Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near,” v.17), but they are nonresponsive. And who could blame them? For that kind of messianic hype is not new. After all, didn’t John the Baptist say the same thing? And look at him. He is now in Herod’s prison (v.12). And look at Jesus. He appears (though mistakenly) to be a man on the run. No wonder they confine themselves to business as usual. What else can they do? Wouldn’t we?

Step 2 – Obscurity: *Sitting in Darkness*. But not just business as usual confines these fishermen. Worse, they are confined by the “darkness” in which they sit (v. 16). Their choice to immerse themselves in business as usual is not really an enlightened (vocational) choice at all, but a resignation to fate, a capitulation to the obscurity that blankets their hearts and minds. Matthew captures this dimension of the problem by reference to the historic memory of Isaiah’s words about the place in which these fishermen lived, the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali (v. 15). As the first to experience exile, the lands of Zebulun and Naphtali are not merely geographical references, but concrete universals representing the darkness and obscurity in which humanity lives.

Step 3 – The Hold of the World: *Sitting in the Region of Death*. To live in obscurity is not to live in security. Ignorance is not bliss and what you don’t know can hurt you. Lurking in the obscurity of darkness and the mundane activity of business as usual is ultimate danger: death (v. 16). The world is “the region of death” and death is the hold of the world on us. That this is our ultimate problem is also corroborated by Matthew from Isaiah’s prophetic words about Zebulun and Naphtali (v. 16). What characterizes the world as the “region of death” is not that it is void of God but that it is in opposition to God (in league with Satan) and thus God-forsaken: exiled, bereft of God’s blessing and inflicted with God’s curse. Death as the hold the world has on us is, thereby, inescapable, sealed by God’s lawful justice as the wage of sin, fate because it is fatal.

Step 6 – The Unusual Business of Jesus: *Fishers of People*. Although the call to follow Jesus entails a break with the world, it does not entail abandoning the world. On the contrary, it reinserts us into the world, but now with the added new agenda Jesus calls “fishing for people” (v. 19). That phrase does not mean that everyone is to become a professional apostle like these four fishermen did. The Kingdom of Heaven consists of neither a set of rules to follow or a list of occupations to choose from. In such matters, we are free to decide on the basis of opportunity and the clarity of faith. Rather, when Jesus says “I will make you fish for people,” he means that, whatever our worldly occupations or locations, there we will find people, like those Jesus found throughout Galilee (v. 23), who will welcome the break from the world the reign of Christ offers. So share it.

Step 5 – Clarity of Faith: *Immediately... they followed him*. Not only did Jesus personally conquer the reign of death for himself, but he also made sure Peter and Andrew, James and John knew that he did it for them. This is the meaning of his words “follow me” (v. 19). In essence he is saying, “Do you want to go through death to life? Well then, follow me.” Therefore, these words are synonymous with “trust me,” the call to faith, and “don’t be afraid,” encouragement to join him in his break with the world. That these fishermen “immediately” (v. 20) broke with the world and followed Jesus signal a kind of clarity of heart and mind that miraculously entered into them. Faith is like having the lights turned on. What before was dark and obscure is now bright and clear. The paradox of faith is that the same Word of Christ that invites us to faith creates faith.

Step 4 – The Reign of Christ: *The Kingdom of Heaven Coming Near*. Enter Jesus. He “withdraws to Galilee” (v. 12) not to escape the fate of John the Baptist, but to confront head-on the hold of the world as the reign of death where it appears strongest: amongst “the least of these,” as Matthew will continuously call them (cf. v. 23), who happen to be Peter, Andrew, James and John in this episode. This confrontation goes by the name of the “Kingdom of Heaven” and its aim is to fulfill what Isaiah foretold: to conquer the reign of death the way light conquers darkness. Of course, the big showdown is yet to come. That will happen in Jerusalem where, on the cross, Jesus will confront the reign of death personally, in his flesh, and by his resurrection, he will conquer it personally, breaking its hold on him forever. In Jesus’ fate (the hold of the world) is broken.

A grounding of Matthew 4:12-23