

“Believe the Good News” – Mk 1:14-20 – Epiphany 3

Those of you who were here last week may remember our reading from John’s gospel about Jesus’ call to Philip and the encounter with Nathaniel. You may even recall that just before that incident in John’s gospel Jesus called Andrew and his brother Simon – who Jesus declared would be renamed Peter. I hope that some of you who do remember those readings said to yourselves, “now wait just a minute!” as we heard the first part of today’s reading from Mark’s gospel about the same incident. For those of you who didn’t catch the problem, and for those of you who either weren’t here or don’t remember the other readings, I’ll spell it out.

In John’s gospel, we are told two disciples of John the Baptizer were standing with him when Jesus walked by, and John said, “Look, here is the Lamb of God.” Those two disciples, Andrew and Simon, turned and followed Jesus, who asked them, “what are you looking at?” However, today’s reading from Mark’s gospel opens with, “Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee ...” and then goes on to describe how Jesus met the two disciples, Andrew and Simon, along the shore, and on to the famous, “I will make you fish for people” declaration.

Now, I’m sure that at least some, perhaps many of you, are sitting there either uncomfortable with me or are angry at me for pointing out this discrepancy. Some people feel that pointing out – especially in a sermon! - where the texts in the Bible are not in agreement with each other seems like somehow airing dirty linen, or blabbing about family secrets in public. Others, who try to hold a firmly inflexible position that the Bible could never contradict itself, will turn themselves inside out trying to smooth this one over, or more likely will cover their ears with their hands and repeat, like a two-year-old, “La-la-la-la! I can’t hear you, I can’t hear you!”

But the reality of that discrepancy is there as clear as the ink on the page ... in John’s gospel Jesus walks by John the Baptizer and Andrew and Simon turn and follow him; in Mark’s gospel John is in prison, and Jesus encounters those two on the beach in Galilee. What do we do with that?

Many people over the past two thousand years have tried to smooth these kinds of things over by conflating the four gospels into one single version, to remove the kinks and bumps and make it all flow like homogenized milk. Thank God the church has resisted such temptations (although the Christmas Card companies still try their darndest!), because blending the four views of the events into one would rob us of a priceless resource for understanding the story of Jesus and His brief ministry. Even blending the three gospels that are so heavily interrelated – Mark, Matthew and Luke – would rob us of vital clues as to who Jesus was, and what He meant to the world.

The real solution to deal with the discrepancy is to remember that several people who see the same event will describe it differently. This is still true today – ask any policewoman who is interviewing witnesses to an accident. “The car was green / no it was red / no it was a truck” And this is doubly true when someone is writing about an event and is trying to convey the meaning of the event to the readers, as is the case in our gospels. Recognizing the particular drum that each gospel author is beating helps to understand how they describe events, and to pick up on their intent.

And Mark’s intent is abundantly clear – to convey that time is running out, that there is a huge sense of urgency to respond to Jesus, and that people sensed something secret and mysterious about this Jesus that caused them to respond to Him “immediately”. We see that sense of urgency throughout Mark’s gospel in general, and in today’s reading in particular. There’s no birth narrative, no Christmas story. Badda-bing, badda-boom: John the Baptizer has come and gone in a few short passages, and even Jesus’ own trial by temptation in the wilderness

has flashed by in a couple of sentences. We meet Jesus as he enters Galilee to begin his ministry, and hear his proclamation; “the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the good news”. There is a risk we might misunderstand his expression “the time is fulfilled” to mean that the waiting is over, that the tension is eased, that the state of urgency is over, when he was telling those who would listen exactly the opposite. “Now is the hour” might be a better way to put it. Or, “any minute, now”. A sense of ultimate urgency, portending a momentous and cosmic event, implying a divine deadline. “Repent”, he urges those around him, echoing the words of the one who had prepared his way, John the Baptist now arrested and delivered up to the jailers. “Repent, turn away from your ways while there is still time” could be the fully expanded version.

Given that sense of urgency, the hanging sword of deadline, we can all too easily hear in Jesus’ proclamation an echo of John the Baptist’s “repent right now, or else” kind of threat, and in doing so miss the second half of Jesus’ proclamation, “and believe in the good news”. Jesus is not proclaiming a ‘repent or else’ message of impending judgment and doom but a message of hope, of redemption, of rescue, of a heaven-sent opportunity and invitation to not only turn away but to turn towards.

And that Jesus indeed offered an invitation becomes abundantly clear in the famous and familiar incident that follows, the story of the calling of the disciples by the Sea of Galilee, the “I will make you fishers of men” passage. While Jesus seems to be casual in his approach, calling the disciples as he was walking by, there still is a sense of urgency conveyed in this abbreviated version of the incident. The brevity of Jesus’ inviting command, “follow me”; the instantaneous response by the two different pairs of fishermen combine to set a tone of breathless “something’s happening!” With one of his 44 uses of the term ‘immediately’ Mark declares, “immediately they left their nets and followed him!”

However, in a totally uncharacteristic way Mark almost spoils the telling of that incident by adding some detail, for some reason feeling a need to explain that the reason Simon and Andrew were casting a net into the sea was because they were fishermen. Good grief! Why else would they be casting a net into the sea? Whether the reason is Mark’s obvious disdain towards the disciples (in no other gospel do they appear so clueless, constantly offering the wrong answers and being ‘amazed’ at what they learn) or a disdain towards his readers, Mark obviously felt a need to point out that they were fishermen so we would “catch” (get it?!) the double meaning in Jesus’ famous saying.

Now there’s nothing like an explanation to ruin a good joke, and that is the case here also. Sadly, all too often we get way too serious about the Good News from Jesus, and we sometimes carry that seriousness to ridiculous extremes, for example being offended at the suggestion that Jesus would tell a joke. But can’t you see the twinkle in those all-knowing eyes? Can’t you hear the smile in his voice as he invites the two of them with the simple but charming invitation, “follow me and I will make you fish for people”?

An invitation that was repeated a bit later to another pair of brothers, James (a fine name!) and John, sons of Zebedee. Jesus called to them, and just like the first two without hesitation they also put down their nets and followed him.

Obviously these four, and eight others, and uncounted millions to come, saw something unusual, and something unusually good, in this Jesus. Without a doubt they recognized that somehow in him God was acting in a new and powerful way, and that what he spoke carried all the truth and meaning of the heavenly Father. For those first disciples this encounter was a true epiphany, the revealing of God present in this unusually appealing person.

So then how are we to respond? Or perhaps more accurately, how are we to continue to respond? We might be tempted to say that the experience of those four disciples can never be repeated for us, thousands of years and miles away from that original event, but we'd be wrong to say so. That experience has already happened for us, and to us. Somewhere, sometime, somehow, that same invitation "follow me" has been offered to you, and you have heard this invitation, and you have responded. At the very least you have followed that invitation here, possibly to learn more, perhaps to say 'thanks', maybe to enjoy the company of others who have likewise been invited. But somewhere, somehow, sometime, Jesus walked past you and called gently, "follow me", and you heard it, and you responded, because you are here.

However, we need to notice that the incident on the beach was but the beginning of a long and productive following. Jesus did not call his disciples to simply gather round him and enjoy him, although that happened aplenty. With his joking, "I will make you fish for people" he told them that they would be bringing their existing talents and skills, and he would help them put those talents and skills to work in the kingdom of God. He didn't call them because they were clueless zombies to be totally reprogrammed with a whole new set of knowledge, skills and personality. Jesus called these fishermen precisely because of who they already were, for their experience, their talents, and their capabilities. And he has called you for exactly the same reasons. No, not because you're fishermen, although some of you might be. Jesus has called you, making the invitation to "follow me", offering the opportunity and excitement of putting your talents and personality to work in the kingdom of God, to evangelise, to proclaim with him that the kingdom is at hand; to repent and believe in the good news; to offer the same invitation to others.

Now to many, if not most, of you that can be a frightening prospect. "Me, evangelize? I can't do that!" Most people think of evangelising as going forth and knocking on doors and handing out tracts or pamphlets, and shy away in great fear. Some of you can do that kind of spreading the word, and God bless you in that service! But I'm pretty sure most of you will pull the "please-don't-call-on-me-to-volunteer-look-down-at-the-shoes" avoidance maneuver at the very suggestion of being involved in that kind of activity.

Relax. Hear the good news. You don't have to evangelize like that if you don't want to. But you still can, and you still are called to, evangelize. You can still proclaim the good news of God's redemption in Christ, with a welcoming smile to someone else who has come in tentative response to their faintly-heard call. Or you can evangelize through voluntary service of some sort, like helping at the Community Breakfast, or picking up bread, or offering to greet people as they arrive, or participating in the worship service. Perhaps your proclamation of the good news will be as simple as radiating the worth and joy that you have found in Christ's love. The numbers of ways in which you can serve are as unlimited as the variety of skills, talents and interests available in you.

Remember also, that Jesus is not looking for perfection from you, merely a response to his invitation to follow him. Just as he promised those first disciples that he, Jesus, would take care of developing them – "I will make you fish for people", so too he promises us he will guide us into being competent and vital servants. The only thing that is asked of us is to respond, to be willing to lay down the nets of our own self-interest and follow him, believing and rejoicing in the good news of redemption through our Lord Jesus Christ.