

The call to the disciples Mark 1:14-20,

Other readings: Amos 7:12-17 & Eph. 4:25-5:2

Mark's gospel seems to me to be told at a great pace. We don't have great detailed discussions like John's gospel, Mark's gospel is on the move. This passage we have before us today is dramatic and life changing, like many of the incidents in this gospel.

Here we have the call of four of the disciples, dealt very briefly in five verses. As I thought about these verses they seemed to crystalize into three key elements – the caller, the called and the calling.

The caller

Mark introduces us to the message of Jesus, as the gospel, the good news from God, as Susan was talking about last week. But there is an urgency in His message "The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." The message demands a response and a radical response, not just passive acceptance, but repentance and faith. God is fulfilling His promises now, He is invading the world in His Messiah, where do you stand? This is the challenge that was being brought by Jesus.

Now Jesus was not using a new expression in the phrase, the Kingdom of God, the concept had a long history, In Rabbinic literature the kingdom of heaven was used to avoid saying the name of God; so Matthew, primarily speaking to a Jewish audience in his gospel, usually uses the term Kingdom of heaven, where the other gospels use the term Kingdom of God. The two expressions denote the same thing - the sovereign rule of God.

As we read through Mark's gospel we will see how Jesus begins by showing us some of the marks of the Kingdom. God's rule will be seen in the life, words and actions of Jesus, the Messiah. God is breaking-in in a new way. He turns upside down some of the accepted patterns of behaviour. Here He calls His disciples; that was different for a start. Previously a prospective disciple would approach the rabbi and ask to be his disciple. Jesus turns all that around and asks Peter, Andrew, James and John to be His disciples, so we already have a different pattern emerging. But not an unknown pattern in the Old Testament, indeed it is often the pattern that it is GOD who calls. God called Abraham, Moses, Samuel, Jeremiah and so we could go on. Indeed the mark of the true prophet was that he had been called by God e.g. the story of Amos we had in our Old Testament reading. Amos, when he was told to go home by Amaziah, said in defence of his ministry "I was no prophet, nor a prophet's son, but I was a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore figs. But the LORD took me from following the flock, and the LORD said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel'" (Amos 7:14-15). So here Jesus comes and calls these four fishermen right where they are, engaged in fishing.

So Jesus takes the pattern of God calling and uses it Himself. Indeed, He goes even further, He calls these men and says follow Me! There is something radical going on here. He doesn't even say follow my teachings, although that is implied, but He says follow Me! "From the lips of anyone else, such a totalitarian call is appalling and outrageous, but the One who calls here is not just anyone. He is Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (Stein, Mark's Commentary p.81).

The amazing thing about the Christian faith is that God calls us to Himself. God called to Adam in the garden and here we have the Son of God calling His disciples by the lakeside. God in His grace comes and calls us to follow Him. It is not us trying to find our way to God, although it may often feel that way; rather it is God drawing us to Himself. For Christmas I received a copy of Alistair McGrath's recently published biography of C.S. Lewis. McGrath writes of the conversion of Lewis "The process of crystallisation around belief in God appears to have taken place over an extended period of time, culminating in a dramatic moment of decision. His resistance to what he increasingly realised to be true, could not be sustained. This was not something he sought, but something that seemed to seek him. God was pounding on the door of Lewis' mind and life. Reality was imposing itself upon him, vigorously and aggressively demanding a response." (C.S. Lewis a life p 137 & p138).

Christianity at heart is not a series of teachings, rules and observances, but a relationship with God Himself through the Lord Jesus Christ, made real to us by the Holy Spirit. So Jesus proclaims "Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28); "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink" (John 7:37). Either He is speaking the truth or He is an imposter, people had to make a choice then, and they do now.

So we have looked briefly at the person and character of the caller.

The called

Jesus was to call all kinds of people to follow Him, here in Mark 1 we have two pairs of fishermen. Josephus, perhaps thirty years later, tells us there were 330 fishing boats on the Lake of Galilee, so the fish business was a major activity. Here we have Jesus approaching ordinary working folk going about their business, indeed Peter and Andrew were actually casting a net into the sea at the time. Mark introduces these four fishermen to us who will feature later in his gospel, as part of the inner circle of disciples. Subsequently in Mark's account we will see that Jesus included all kinds of people among His disciples, many of them not the sort of people a rabbi would have as his pupils, why there were even some women!

Here we have four fishermen just going about their daily lives and this young up and coming preacher man calls them to follow Him. We don't know just

how much they already knew of Jesus and His life and teaching. Luke's and John's accounts suggest they had already met and heard Jesus. Whatever little they knew about Him was going to be amplified beyond all measure, as they listened and watched Him over the next three years. Mark at this point is emphasizing the power of the words of Jesus, the Son of God, and we shall see more of this in the following verses.

So these four fishermen responded to the call of Jesus, they just left what they were doing and followed. They stuck with Him until He was led away after their last Passover meal. Even when some of his disciples found His sayings too much to stomach, Peter declared "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that You are the Holy One of God." (John 6:68-69). Yes, they forsook Him in His hour of need, but after the resurrection they were graciously restored to an unshakeable faith in Jesus. So after the healing of the cripple at the Gate Beautiful in the Temple, Peter boldly proclaimed before the High Priest, the rulers and elders "This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:11-12), and went on to say "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard." (Acts 4:19-20).

The disciples were called and chosen by Jesus, "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide" (John 15:16). This wasn't something special just for the apostles, for Paul says to the church at Thessalonica, "For we know, brothers loved by God, that He has chosen you" (1 Thess. 1:4).

Jesus called ordinary folk and His call comes to us too, so now we look at the calling.

The calling

God's call to follow comes with a promise, as happens throughout Scripture. Jesus was going to transform them into fishers of men if they followed. We might think this is just a simple play on words. The Old Testament prophets used this metaphor for gathering people for judgment (Jer. 16:14-16; Ezek. 29:4; Amos 4:2), although this was sometimes linked to future restoration to faith in God. "When a fisherman hooks a fish, it has fatal consequences for the fish, life cannot go on as before. This image fits the transforming power of God's rule that brings judgment and death to the old, yet promises a new creation" (Garland's commentary on Mark p. 69).

So God calls and God transforms His disciples, it's the pattern we find repeated in the teachings of the New Testament. "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will

and to work for His good pleasure” Phil. 2:12-13); “And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another” (2 Cor. 3:18). God calls and transforms us by His Spirit.

The four he calls, he calls to a total change of life, fishermen to fishers of men. This is total life changing stuff. Not just add a little religion to your lives but a total life change, a new occupation, a new leader, a new lord, a new master to be answerable to for all we do. A clear example of how Mark introduced Jesus’ preaching – repent and believe. As Tom Wright says “Jesus was now calling them to trust the good news that their God was doing something new. To get in on the act they had to cut loose from other ties and trust Him and His message. That wasn’t easy then and isn’t easy now. But that’s what Peter, Andrew, James and John did, and it’s what all Christians are called to do” (Mark for Everyone, p10).

It’s a dramatic and immediate call, come now and follow Me. Not, I would like you to consider being my disciples, please give some thought to it and then get back to me when, and if, you feel ready – Jesus’ call is very direct and immediate and it demands an answer. Will you follow Me now?

Intriguingly the word disciple is not used in these verses in Mark, although it is implicit in Jesus’ words “follow me”, particularly if the picture before us is of a rabbi and his disciples. The disciple left home and moved in with his teacher. He was expected to not only learn everything his teacher knew but to become like him in character. Only then was he allowed to be a rabbi. In Jesus’ case when the training had finished they were not to be rabbis of His teaching, but witnesses to Him! Consequently although Jesus was referred to as rabbi or teacher, the apostles never received such labels, Jesus is always Lord.

Jesus develops further what it means to follow Him when He talks about denying oneself and taking up ones cross in Mark 8 but I don’t want to preempt that sermon. Jesus also changes the picture from a rabbi and his disciples to a shepherd and his sheep in John’s gospel. “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me” (John 10:27); the picture of the eastern shepherd with the sheep following their shepherd; an incredibly intimate picture, the shepherd speaks to them and knows each one of them. But in this case the picture takes on another dimension when Jesus says He will lay down His life for the sheep. Never doubt the fact of God’s love for you, Jesus laid down His very life for you, even death on a cross.

There is a basic principle unfolding here, 1) God calls, 2) we believe and follow, and 3) God, in His grace and mercy, commits Himself to us. It’s like a three-fold cord, call, response and receive. So Jesus took the initiative in calling, but He was then totally committed to those who responded. In all their wanderings in Galilee and Judea, Jesus never withdrew His love from the

disciples. They misunderstood or didn't grasp what He was saying, they were sometimes headstrong or presumptuous, but He continued to patiently love them. He loved them to the end, says John (John 13:1).

So discipleship involves the whole of life, it is a total call to commitment to Jesus, to follow, to imitate and so be obedient to Him. So in our epistle "be imitators of God, as beloved children" (Eph. 5:1). Be like your Father in heaven, says Paul, imitate Him just like children imitate their parents or disciples imitate their rabbis. Again earlier in his epistle Paul urged his readers "to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called" (Eph. 4:1). Live up to your high calling. It's not just signing up to a set of rules or creeds but a personal ongoing relationship with a new Master, who is totally committed to us. God says to us "I will never leave you or forsake you" (Heb. 13:5).

So we have looked briefly at the caller, the called and the calling.

So how do we, both preacher and listeners, respond to these things?

In the silence please respond in your hearts to these questions:

- Have I responded to the call of Jesus? Am I really his disciple?
- If I am his disciple, how closely am I following Him?
- Am I following afar off, apprehensive of coming too close?
- Am I close enough to hear His still, small voice?
- Am I like Mary sitting at His feet receiving all He has for me?

Later on in our service we will celebrate Communion and a further opportunity to respond to God's call. The Anglican Church recognises two sacraments, baptism and communion. Now the word sacrament is derived from the Latin *sacramentum* which was the oath of allegiance that Roman soldiers took to the emperor, so each time we take communion we have an opportunity to renew or to begin our discipleship vows to Jesus, our Lord and Saviour.