

Following This Jesus
Leith Valley, Sunday 6th September
Reading Mark 1:1-20

I want to begin with Mark 1:16-20, where Jesus issues his first call to disciples in Mark's Gospel. We probably know the story well. Jesus walks along the shore of the Sea of Galilee – and meets up with Simon and Andrew and then with James and John. He calls them to “Come Follow me” and they up and off – and immediately follow Jesus.

It's easy to think that this was the second or third time Jesus had met these four guys. We can imagine that he'd met them the previous week and said ... “I have an offer I really want you to think about. Next week I'm going to call you to follow me. Why don't you think about it? It's an exciting prospect ... I've got lots to offer. Some excellent teaching. The occasional amazing feast in the desert. A few challenges, a bit of persecution, but the jobs got great fringe benefits and an excellent superannuation scheme! And all sorts of eternal benefits. So just think about it. I'll be along next week to see what you think.”

But no! This is the first time they've met Jesus and that's how Mark presents it. There's no preliminary introduction, there's no “Why don't you think about it?” Jesus simply sees them – calls them – and they follow. Immediately – as Mark is fond of saying (he uses it 40x).

And look at the cost they pay. Simon and Andrew leave their nets; James and John leave their father Zebedee in the boat, with the hired men. They leave occupation, income, their business, their family, all their security.

This is no easy thing. As fishermen, they're not wealthy, but they are not completely destitute either – they have a family fishing business which they leave behind. And we know that they will follow Jesus around in Galilee in an itinerant ministry. Jesus will be “of no fixed abode” – and the disciples share in that wandering around.

That's fine – you might think. A bit of OE is good for us all! Young people have always gone wandering ... But in the first century, did people “wander around”? *When* did they leave occupation and income and family? Only in times of war and famine! Only when you were absolutely forced to do so! Normally you stayed at home!!!

So this is dramatic stuff. The sort of thing you'd only do as a result of great disaster ...

We lived in Glasgow for a year, and tried to find out the going rate for babysitting. But no one employed a baby-sitter, because Mum lived down the road and sister was round the corner. People stayed put! That's what it was like in the first century – people didn't move unless they really had to.

But these disciples are up and off – at the *first* call from Jesus! They just meet him – and leave everything. That's how Mark tells the story! Radical stuff.

BUT why are the four prepared to leave everything behind? Why, *on their first meeting with Jesus*, do they follow, and at such a cost?

Because of who Jesus is! He is the sort of person who calls people to leave everything and follow! And they do!! There's something about this Jesus!! They leave all, because of who he is!!

Mark has begun his Gospel very carefully – by showing how great, how amazing Jesus is! This picture of Jesus' authority, of who he is in Chapter 1– is in part so that we can understand *why* the 4 fishermen “up and off”!

So who is Jesus said to be at the beginning of Mark's Gospel?

- Mark starts with “The good news/ gospel of Jesus Christ”. This word “gospel”, “good news” was used of “good news” like the proclamation of the emperor’s birthday. But here is the most wonderful “good news” of Jesus, the good news of which Isaiah spoke – that “Our God reigns”.

- The good news is concerning Jesus Christ, the Messiah. He is the deliverer, the one who fulfills Israel’s hopes; who brings the promises of the Old Testament to fulfilment.

- Jesus is the Son of God – the one who shares in such intimacy with God, that he can call God “Abba”; the one who is uniquely related to God, as God’s Son.

- In v2 we have “As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way, the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight’.”

The messenger Isaiah spoke of is John the Baptist – and he is to “Prepare the way of the Lord”. In the book of Isaiah, Isaiah is speaking of the messenger who will prepare the way of Yahweh, the God of Israel – to prepare Yahweh’s way through the desert to restore Israel. But here in Mark this call to “Prepare the way of the Lord” is being applied to Jesus – Jesus is the “Lord” whose way is being prepared by John the Baptist.

But “Lord” is the name that is used of Yahweh in the Old Testament. Lord is another name for Yahweh. So here in Mark Jesus is being given God’s own name of “Lord”! Clearly, Jesus is no ordinary human. In fact, he shares God’s name of Lord – because he is God come among us!

- In v5, John causes a great stir: “And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him”.

But then in v7-8 were told that John says: “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals.”

Who would normally untie sandals? Dusty roads, smelly feet ... you’d often do it yourself! It was one of the tasks that was too demeaning, too horrible for a Jewish slave to do for a master. Perhaps a student of a rabbi might do it for a rabbi – as an act of great devotion. ... A horrible job.

But what does John say: “I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals.” I am not worthy to do this horrible task.

So Jesus, slave, John even lower! John is not worthy to do the slaves task! But “people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him” – because they thought he was so important!!

See how great Jesus is by comparison! John is great, but regards himself as insignificant, unworthy in comparison to the great and amazing Jesus!

Why is Jesus amazing? John also says: “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me”. Jesus is the more powerful one – who will free people from demons, who will forgive people their sins, who can do powerful miracles! His power to make people whole.

- And then in v8 John says: “I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” So Jesus will baptize with the Spirit. This is another reason that he is so amazing! This

will happen at Pentecost. But it's also something that Jesus will do in his ministry. The Spirit is the one who cleanses, who makes new, who forgives!. In Ezek 36:25-27 we read:

"I [God] will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances."

The Spirit is the cleansing agent, forgiving sin. Jesus baptizes in the Spirit. Jesus will do this during his ministry as he cleanses hearts, forgives sins, and makes new! John the Baptist can't do this – but Jesus can and will!

- In v9-10 we're told that Jesus was baptised by John, and the Spirit descends on Jesus like a dove. The Spirit came upon prophets in the OT – but just for a time. The Spirit comes like a dove and rests, and remains on Jesus. Jesus can baptise with the Holy Spirit, because he has the Spirit dwelling in him permanently, in abundance.

- And then in v11 God says from heaven: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." God confirms that Jesus is uniquely related to God, as God's Son with whom God is well pleased.

- Then Jesus is "in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts". What is the outcome of the temptation? We're not told directly. But someone else was tempted by Satan ... we're to think of Adam and Eve. And that did not work out well – they gave in to temptation, and enmity resulted –between humans and the snake and between humans themselves.

But before the fall, Adam had named all the animals – and been at peace with them. So Jesus, unlike Adam and Eve, is tempted but does not give in, defeats Satan and re-establishes peace with the animals – with the creation. Jesus is the Second Adam, who overcomes Satan, defeats him, and restores peace.

- Then after John is arrested Jesus proclaims ""The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." Jesus is the one who brings the good news of the Kingdom. The rule of God, the new way of God, is breaking into the world in the ministry of Jesus!

So throughout this introduction to Mark's Gospel, Jesus' authority shines through! Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, the Lord! The more powerful one. The one on whom the Spirit descends. The one who baptises in the Spirit. The one who defeats Satan, the Second Adam who brings the Kingdom!

And so we come back to the story of Jesus calling Simon and Andrew, and James and John. Why do they follow Jesus on their *first contact* with him? Because of who Jesus is! Because he is so amazing! Because of his authority! Because he is the Son of God, the Lord, God with us.

And this Jesus continues to call us – all of us! We are all being called to "Follow me" by this amazing Jesus!

What is Jesus' call to these four guys? It is to "follow me and I will send you out to fish for people." *First* of all they are called to *follow Jesus*.

This is very interesting in itself. Normally, when a person went to learn from a Jewish rabbi, they would be following the Torah, the law. They would be a student of the Torah – a student who for a time was following Rabbi Jonathan, or Rabbi Samuel. But their primary allegiance would be to the Law. After they had learnt all they could from Rabbi Jonathan, they would move on to Rabbi Samuel, and so on.

But Jesus is entirely different. He doesn't call people to be students of the Law. He doesn't call them to learn from him for a while and then go on to someone else. Instead of this, it is all about a personal relationship with Jesus. The call is "Follow Me"!

And in Mark 3, when Jesus calls the 12, Mark says "And he appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with him."

Jesus says 'Follow Me'. From this point in Mark, that's basically what the disciples do. The disciples are virtually always with Jesus.

All of us, called by Jesus, are *first of all* called to *be* with Jesus. It's not first and foremost a call to "Fish for people". Its first and foremost a call to be, to be with Jesus. "Come, Follow Me". Be with me.

Wow!! ... difficult. I can handle the *call to do*. Give me a list, and I'll work through it. My life seems run by lists, by emails to be answered, by tasks to be done.

But this call is first of all a call to a *relationship* with Jesus – the call to be with Jesus – not to do, just to be.

It seems to me that this is one of the hardest things about the Christian life these days. Of course, we want a list of things to do! We want to achieve things, to get them done. But we are called, first of all, to be with Jesus. We're called – not to an intensive phase of doing ... but to an intensive phase of just being – with Jesus. Jesus says, follow me!

There's a great story in Acts 4 of Peter and John before the Jewish Council in Jerusalem. Peter preaches to them about Jesus. And then we're told in Acts 4:13: Now when they [the rulers, elders and scribes in Jerusalem] saw the boldness of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were amazed and recognized that they had been with Jesus."

Wonderful. They "recognized that they had been with Jesus". Wouldn't that be great – if the world could see that "we had been with Jesus."

The first call of Jesus is to be with him. And in our relationship with our Lord Jesus, the Son of God, God with us, we find ourselves loved and cherished, and nourished and made whole!

And then, and only then – only after "Following", being with Jesus, is it about "being sent out to fish for people".

This is a different sort of fishing. When I go fishing it's for my sake – I like to eat the fish! Its for my benefit! Its to the detriment of the fish – I catch them and eat them!!

But Jesus' call to fish for people – is for the sake of the fish!! It is so that those fish – those people – come to know Jesus too! We, as followers of Jesus, are to introduce others to our friend, our Lord Jesus. They are to be with him too, to be transformed by him.

Jesus spent his ministry fishing for people – calling them to be with him, to be part of the kingdom of God, the new breaking in of God's reign that was happening through his

ministry. And that ministry of Jesus continues – and we are given the privilege of being part of it.

And so this is a call to be there for others. To serve, as Christ has served us. To love others, as we have been loved.

For the four disciples, for Simon and Andrew, James and John, this was a costly call. They gave up family, and home, and income, and identity. For Jesus, fishing for people was a costly ministry too – it cost him his life. We too are called to that life of following Jesus, in a life of giving ourselves away. It's a highly counter-cultural calling where what counts is not ourselves, but the other person – for Jesus' sake.

This is not a life where what counts is numbers, and success, and accolades. What counts is Jesus, and others.

But what other sort of life would we have? When the one we follow is so amazing – the Messiah, the Son of God, the Lord, who baptises in the Spirit, who is the more powerful one, who defeats the evil one, the Second Adam who brings the kingdom, who calls even us!

To conclude. Jesus calls us all to follow him. May we be with him and follow him – because he is so amazing! May we be with him!

And as we follow, as we leave behind many things in service to our Lord, as we pay the cost of following Jesus, may we know that when we give our lives away, we truly find life with this amazing Jesus, the one who is our Lord, and our God.

To God be the Glory. Amen.

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