

Fishers of Men

A Bible Study on the Call to Discipleship

Study Bible Studies Not stated

Mark 1:14-18

Romans 14:17-19

Matthew 13:31-32

Jeremiah 1:5

Mark 11:2

Matthew 6:24

Luke 18:18-23 (referenced)

Introduction

We will focus today on the passage read to us a few moments ago, from the Gospel according to Mark, chapter 1, verses 14 to 20. Having proclaimed that the kingdom of God is near, Jesus proceeds to hand-pick four of His first disciples: Peter, Andrew, James, and John. If we could summarise the lesson of today's passage in a single sentence, it might read something like this: Jesus has called each one of us, by name, in our hearts, to be His disciples.

Mark's Gospel is quite unique. He tells us of dramatic, action-packed incidents in the earthly life of Jesus, giving us the most vivid account of Christ's activities; he features facts and actions rather than teachings. The way our Lord Jesus Christ lived His earthly life is the perfect example of how we should live our own lives today. We will, therefore, take a look at what Jesus demands of each one of us, in the context of today's lesson.

The passage begins by marking the transition from John's ministry to that of Jesus. As is typical of Mark, he accomplishes this with a minimum of words: "Now after that John was put in prison, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God" (Mark 1:14). This verse closes the door on John the Baptist's ministry, and opens the door on that of Jesus.

The Kingdom of God

At first glance, Jesus' mission does not appear all that different from John the Baptist's. He too speaks of repentance, but for a different reason altogether. John called for repentance as a way of preparing for the Messiah; Jesus calls for repentance because of the kingdom of God itself. The waiting is over. God has begun a new movement in the world.

Almost as a prologue to His gathering of disciples, Jesus makes this profound proclamation: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel" (Mark 1:15).

It will be worth our while, at this point, to consider what Jesus meant by "the kingdom of God," in which He wanted His disciples, and now all of us, to labour. It is central to Jesus, since the kingdom of God is the very

message He preaches. But what is the kingdom of God like? In general terms, a kingdom is the land and the people under the rule of a king or queen. But it is about more than simply who is in charge; it is about who defines what life within that kingdom is like. In Romans we read: "For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost. For he that in these things serveth Christ is acceptable to God, and approved of men. Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another" (Romans 14:17-19). It is a call to discipleship of Jesus Christ; it is a call to servanthood in His kingdom.

Of the kingdom of God, Jesus said: "The kingdom of heaven is like to a grain of mustard seed, which a man took, and sowed in his field: Which indeed is the least of all seeds: but when it is grown, it is the greatest among herbs, and becometh a tree, so that the birds of the air come and lodge in the branches thereof" (Matthew 13:31-32; compare Mark 4:31-32 and Luke 13:19). This is how God is at work in the world. A tiny, dried seed, sown, watered, and weeded, becomes life, and that life gives rise to new life in fresh seed, taking its place within a larger created order, in relationship with birds and insects and other people, just like us.

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, a seed so small that it takes a thousand to fill a matchbox. Cast into a field, such seeds grow five or six feet, and in some regions as much as fourteen feet, producing a canopy of brilliant yellow, like fire or the blazing sun. In such a forest of mustard branches, birds find their home, and all is at peace within the kingdom of heaven. When God's glory shows up — when the divine order breaks into the chaos of human existence — the result is the kingdom of God.

Christ's Choice of His Disciples

We often assume that Jesus' disciples were, from the very first, great men of faith. That is a mistaken assumption. Every one of them had to grow in faith, just as all believers, you and I included, must do. Although it took time for Jesus' call and message to sink in, the disciples followed Him nonetheless. In the same way, we too may question and falter, but we must never stop following Jesus.

It was not as though Jesus had no choice; He was well known at the Temple. Yet, interestingly, none of His disciples were priests of the Jewish faith — the natural place to recruit from, had He wished to found a religious movement in the ordinary way. When the time came to choose those through whom the Church would be founded, He chose twelve men from the marketplace: fishermen, a tax collector, a physician, and others besides. Let us look briefly at the traits, and at some notable events in the lives, of the first four disciples Jesus called:

Peter (Simon) was a fisherman, known to be outspoken and impulsive; he later became bold in preaching about Jesus. He belonged to the inner circle of three disciples; he recognised Jesus as the Messiah; he denied Jesus, and repented; he preached at Pentecost; he became a leader of the Church at Jerusalem; he baptised Gentiles; and he wrote the two epistles that bear his name. Jesus described him as "the rock."

Andrew, Peter's brother, was likewise a fisherman, and eager to bring others to Jesus. He accepted John the Baptist's testimony concerning Jesus, and told Peter of Him; Jesus told him that he would become a fisher of men.

James, a third fisherman among Jesus' disciples, was ambitious, short-tempered, and judgemental, yet deeply committed to Jesus. He too belonged to the inner circle of three; he asked Jesus for a place of honour in His kingdom; he wished to call down fire to destroy a Samaritan village; and he was the first of the disciples to be martyred. Jesus called him and his brother John "Sons of Thunder."

John, James' brother and the fourth fisherman among the disciples, is known as "the disciple whom Jesus loved." He began, like his brother, ambitious and judgemental, but grew into a man marked above all by love. He too belonged to the inner circle of three; he asked Jesus for a place of honour in His kingdom, and wished to call down fire on a Samaritan village. He became a leader of the Church at Jerusalem, and wrote the Gospel that bears his name, together with three epistles and the book of Revelation.

The picture becomes clearer: Jesus was not, and is not, looking for extraordinary people to work for Him. He calls ordinary people, like you and me, to take up the cross and follow Him. We would do well to learn from the response of those fishermen and that tax collector. When Jesus said to them, "Follow me," their obedience was absolute — putting one foot before the other and walking behind Him, without a single question asked, becoming part of His travelling company.

To Be Part of Jesus' Team

Jesus knew that He would not always be on earth in a physical sense. He knew, from the very beginning, where He was headed — to that lonely cross on the hill. But He also knew that the movement He had begun would continue after He had returned to His Father in heaven. And He was right, exactly as He had been in all things. Who would have guessed that two thousand years ago, when the body of Jesus was laid in the ground, His resurrected body — His Church — would grow to include well over two billion people around the world today?

When Jesus said to Peter and Andrew, "Come ye after me, and I will make you to become fishers of men" (Mark 1:17), He was using imagery

relevant to them; but His call applies to all of us. It means that we should join Him in the work He came to do, and He tells us, repeatedly, what that work is: to carry the good news to the four corners of the earth, and to bring sinners to repentance. When we join His company, the gospel becomes like a net, lifting us out of dark waters into the light of day, and transforming our lives, as it did the lives of His disciples. Walking with Jesus, at all times, teaches us, as it taught His disciples then, how He can use us to fish for people, and how we, in turn, may train new converts to cast their own nets into waters never fished before. The gospel makes missionaries of all God's people. Jesus knows each one of us well enough: "Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations" (Jeremiah 1:5). What right, then, have we not to be His followers?

The question before us this morning is: where are we casting our nets today?

We are given no background regarding the disciples' quick response. We are not told whether Peter, Andrew, James, and John had already heard Jesus preach, and were thereby prepared to make so life-changing a decision; nor are we told whether Jesus had spoken to these men beforehand, to weigh them for so weighty a calling. We are simply told that Jesus saw them, and called out to them, "Follow me" — and that they responded by dropping whatever they were about, and following Him. There is no reason to doubt that this is how it happened; their response was spontaneous.

The disciples seem to have understood this invitation to discipleship in much the same way as they had understood the call of John the Baptist. Whatever the full extent of their understanding, these men made radical and immediate decisions that changed their lives for ever. They left their daily work, dropped their nets, and abandoned their established way of life. The passage makes plain that James and John walked away, too, from their family ties. We cannot help but be amazed, and moved, by the immediate and radical commitment Jesus inspired in these fishermen.

Let us pause and reflect: what is our own state of mind this morning? Are we inspired by Jesus, or are we still enchanted by the frills of this world?

The Cost of Discipleship

It makes one wonder how we, in the Church, might duplicate that "drop everything" kind of discipleship. Jesus does not call any of us to a casual discipleship. He does not call us merely to free grace, but to costly discipleship. Here lies the paradox: on the one hand, grace is free, and costs us nothing — we cannot earn it by any amount of our own work;

but on the other hand, discipleship costs us everything. God expects us to commit all that we are, and all that we have. Perhaps our own difficulty is that we are too quick to hear the free-gift part of God's grace, and too slow to hear the absolute demand that we be His disciples.

The disciples understood, from the first, that Jesus had not invited them to become mere spectators; rather, He wanted them to join Him in proclaiming the good news of the kingdom. He makes this plain when He says, "Come ye after me, and I will make you to become fishers of men." When we grasp Jesus' words, we shall understand that the Christian Church is the largest fishing society the world has ever known. Our commission from Christ is to go fishing — to bring men and women into the kingdom of God. He wants us to carry on the message of His kingdom, and to prepare the world for His second coming, that we might be citizens of His new creation.

I recall the story of a fishing club whose members did nothing but sit around swapping stories about the great catches they had made — the one that broke away, the whale that got loose — yet never once stepped into a boat or cast a line into the water. What kind of fishing club would that be, whose members were content merely to admire the trophies on the wall, but never went out to fish at all?

A good many churches are exactly like that. They sit around, reminiscing about the days when their boat was full of fresh fish; they look back with nostalgia to the days when the church's main purpose was to go fishing, to reach others for Christ — but they never go fishing themselves; they merely talk about it. Let us be very clear: that is not what we, the Church, are meant to be about. We so often make this very mistake — talking about fishing, but never actually fishing; or inviting people to come and see our programmes and possibilities, rather than inviting them to see and know the presence, the power, and the person of Jesus Christ Himself.

What Does It Mean to Go Fishing with Jesus?

The call to discipleship is on Christ's terms, not ours; and, by the same token, the cost of discipleship, or of servanthood, is set by the Lord, not by the servant. In our desperate attempt to play the numbers game in today's churches, we too often invite people to join us with no regard for the cost of discipleship. It is easy to be caught up in the enthusiasm and excitement of the moment, and to join the crowd on that basis alone.

At the end of His ministry, on the day of His crucifixion, Jesus owned nothing but the clothes on His back. The cost of His discipleship was high: it cost Him His life, executed as a criminal, in obedience to the will of His heavenly Father. Jesus was obedient unto death, even death

on a cross; and, save for one who died of old age, all His disciples were martyred, some of them meeting the most terrible of deaths.

We are too quick to join up without counting the cost. Discipleship of Jesus is radical. We are called to choose between the pleasures, relationships, and compulsions of this world, on the one hand, and taking up the cross for Jesus, on the other. We cannot serve two masters; we shall love the one, and hate the other (compare Matthew 6:24). The disciple no longer lives for himself, but for the kingdom of God; what happens to our own life becomes unimportant; what truly matters is our submission to the will of God.

He has not left the standard of discipleship to us to determine; Jesus is Lord, and He alone sets its conditions. Since He is God, we owe Him total obedience and total self-surrender — radical, indeed, by the world's own way of thinking. The disciple of Jesus Christ cannot live merely to please himself. This, perhaps, is why so many enthusiastically join up, only to quietly fall away a little while later.

Let us recall the plight of the rich young ruler, who met Jesus and sought to become His disciple (Luke 18:18-23). He was a righteous man, who kept all the commandments faithfully; but when he learned that he must dispose of all his wealth and give it to the poor before he could follow Jesus, he turned away, though with a heavy heart.

Let us also consider the little donkey on which Jesus made His triumphant entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday (Mark 11:1-11). He told His disciples, "Go your way into the village over against you: and as soon as ye be entered into it, ye shall find a colt tied, whereon never man sat; loose him, and bring him" (Mark 11:2). The Lord needed that donkey to fulfil His mission here on earth. Is that not remarkable? Jesus, being God, could have accomplished this in whatever way He chose — yet He chose to use that little donkey.

Three things stand out about that donkey. It first had to be set free: tethered where it stood, it could serve no purpose at all until someone came and loosed it, just as we can be of little use to the Lord while we remain bound by our own sin — those cords, too, must first be cut. It had, secondly, to be claimed as its owner's own: under the law given through Moses, a firstling donkey belonged to its master only because a lamb had been offered in its place (compare Exodus 34:20); in the very same way, we belong to God, and live, only because the Lamb of God was offered in ours. And, thirdly, it had to yield: the passage tells us this colt had never once been ridden, yet at the touch of the Lord it went exactly where it was led, unafraid of the crowds pressing around it, offering no resistance at all. That is what He looks for in us, too — not a grudging compliance, but a whole and willing surrender.

By the same token, Jesus is still using little donkeys to accomplish His work on earth today. He uses the likes of you and me. He could have

entrusted the task to angels, but He chooses, instead, to work through human instruments. We should be glad to be part of our Lord's business; we should be glad that He can use little donkeys like us.

The Pleasures of Discipleship

What does it mean to go fishing with Jesus? First of all, we are meant to enjoy it. It is not supposed to fill us with fear, frustration, or dread. When we speak of reaching other people, most of us find ourselves filled with dread rather than with any real anticipation of joy. The fishing analogy helps us see the joy that comes when lives are changed by the power of God's love; but before we can enjoy that, we have to get out there and land a few fish ourselves. Then we begin to understand the joy of the catch, and to grow as fishermen. Some are filled with fear; others, with anticipation of a great catch — but all of us must first get our hook wet, before we can understand what it truly means to go fishing.

Another lesson from the fishing analogy is that we must go where the fish are. Many fishermen grow frustrated because they never do so. Most church people try to fish by sitting in the boat, waiting for the fish to come to them; it simply does not work that way. The greatest danger of all is when we try to fish only from within the confines of our own churches.

We must also use the right bait. The fishermen of Jesus' day generally used a net, which carries its own lessons; but most fishermen today prefer bait of one kind or another. We must, however, be careful with this analogy. We are not trying to trick people, so as to feed upon them or use them for our own ends; rather, we must find what genuinely interests people, and use that as a means of drawing them into the kingdom of God. We are not luring anyone to their death, but leading them to new life in Jesus Christ, meeting them with the gospel at the very point of their need.

Conclusion

I would like to leave you with a few questions, on which each of us might reflect in our own quiet time.

What is our state of mind this morning? Are we inspired by Jesus, or still enchanted by the frills of this world? Are we willing to take up the cross and follow Jesus at any cost, or do we intend to go fishing without ever wetting our line? Do we want to be like the rich young man who met Jesus and retreated, or are we willing to be absolutely obedient to our Lord, working according to His rule, like that little donkey? Are our churches content to remain like that fishing club, admiring past glories, or are we ready to focus on evangelising and bringing people to Christ?

Let us pray: Merciful Master, Jesus Christ, we know that Your will for us is not simply to accept well-defined tasks, and to work according to the directions of others. Your wish for us today, Lord, is that we be mingled with the masses; You call us to plunge boldly into a world that has wandered far from the path of truth. Lord, in complete forgetfulness of ourselves, may we become meeting places between You and our brothers and neighbours, so that You may no longer be, to them, a distant and unknown God, but a Father close at hand. In Your precious name. Amen.