

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

For the sake of clarity, let me reiterate the purpose of my homilies on Sunday mornings. They are meant to illuminate the Gospel reading for the day which, without the benefit of research and analysis, can remain difficult to understand in its original context. *Providing context*, then, is the whole point. And I believe this is entirely within the traditional purpose of preaching in the Anglican tradition.

Today's lesson takes us to the very beginning of Mark's gospel. He does not include a nativity scene or an extensive genealogy as Matthew and Luke do, so he gets right to the point, completely overlooking the birth of Jesus which does not seem to have had importance for the followers of Jesus prior to the composition of the other gospels some 20-30 years later. It is unclear why this is the case unless it has something to do with the relationship of the Jesus group with respect to the Roman empire. In other words, it may have been important at a later point to emphasize the extraordinary circumstances of his birth in order to compare him favorably with Caesar. Also, Mark is usually a very economical writer, never wasting words on something that can best be said simply. Up to verse 13 is a kind of overture leading to the passage beginning with verse 14 when Mark pulls up the curtain to reveal the very start of his story, and he emphasizes that this is the "beginning" only. However, it is possible that what he means by using the term "beginning" is to suggest that this most compelling of all stories "finally knows no bounds (whatever)."

It is actually a "humble, modest start" when compared with the more elaborate passages in Luke and Matthew regarding the Nativity of Jesus or his genealogy. Interestingly, the angel's words to the women at the empty tomb at the end of the gospel are: "*you must go to Galilee for there you will see him.*" Thus, we need to return to the humble beginning of this account and the everyday, mundane characters who inhabit the story to understand the thrust of his book. Mark's gospel is also the first (c. 70 C.E.) of the four canonical accounts to have been written. So, this passage gets us closer to the actual events than we are likely to find elsewhere because the earlier (from the 50s C.E.) epistles of St. Paul do not focus on the life of Jesus but emphasize the crucifixion and resurrection and their theological importance.

And what Mark does here is to take us almost immediately into the story of the public ministry of Jesus in Galilee. Though he is called Jesus of *Nazareth*, he did not spend much time in his hometown. It was remote and thus not a good place to launch a new ministry when the object was to reach people. Galilee offered that exposure. He made Capernaum his base of operations. It had a thriving fishing industry and was located on an active trade route. There was a diverse population around the lake, (in Mark, "the

narrative function of the Sea of Galilee is to divide the Jews and the Gentiles”), but It was among the Jewish population there that Jesus sought a response to his message.

This lesson takes us almost immediately to the story of the gathering of what we might call the “Jesus circle.” Actually, “from now until Gethsemane Jesus appears in the narrative constantly accompanied by his disciples, and their training and development will be (a primary focus) of the story.” And the narrative of his relationship with those disciples goes to the very heart of the narrative of the life and ministry of Jesus. These simple folks “may, and often will, fail him and disappoint him, but their role is crucial to the achievement of his mission, for it is through this flawed and vulnerable group of people that God’s kingship will be established. And Mark will expect that his listeners and readers will find the basis...for their own discipleship through the tracing of the development of this ‘Jesus circle’.”

The four men we are introduced to here (Peter, Andrew, and James and John of Zebedee) will form the core of the group, and they will represent the essential elements of discipleship: “(a) the relationship with Jesus; (b) the active promotion of his mission, and (c) the total commitment to his cause.” The call to the first disciples does not fit the model of a rabbi and his students. Rather, it more accurately reflects that of the “charismatic leader” which we first witnessed in the Old Testament story of Elijah’s call to Elisha. Rabbis did not call their students; the pupil adopted the teacher. Jesus’ summons to his disciples is “peremptory” --- abrupt but not imperious. And this marks him as a prophet rather than a rabbi. The fact that he could make such an outrageous demand “without explanation and receive instant obedience” suggests an extraordinary dimension to the charisma of Jesus. However, the Gospel of John tells us that these men may formerly have been part of an inner circle devoted to John the Baptist which provides a bit more background which may be helpful in understanding the immediacy of their response. In the end, though, it may suffice to say that these four men experienced a true epiphany when they met Jesus. Epiphanies, “especially of the divine nature, demand an immediate response.”

Nevertheless, our understanding of the expression “fishers of men” may be inadequate. Taking up the invitation to follow Jesus required more than an assent of the heart; it required a “fundamental reordering of socio-economic relationships. The first step in dismantling the dominant social order (was) to overturn the ‘world’ of the disciple: in the kingdom, the personal and the political (became) one.” Thus, it was not so much a “call *out*” of the world as a call “*into* an alternative social practice.”

Additionally, we misunderstand the notion of fishing for men if we view it as somehow describing how new converts are “saved” in order to give them eternal life in heaven. That is not at all the point. “In the ancient world, fishing was a metaphor for two distinct activities: judgment and teaching.” Fishing for people, then, meant bringing them to justice by dragging them out of their hiding places and setting them before the judge at the end of the world.” The term was also used to refer to teaching people, and “leading them from ignorance to wisdom.”

The fact that we are told that Andrew and Peter have their own house and that James and John have hired hands tells us that these were not poor, destitute fishermen, but that they were prosperous in their trade. In a sense, however, their willingness to immediately leave their nets and follow Jesus indicates that their livelihood and family relationships took a back seat to their desire to follow Jesus but also gave them the ability to simply drop everything and take up an entirely new purpose.

In Mark, Galilee is a “theological-geographical sphere where Jesus’ public ministry occurred, where his Parousia (or Second Coming) will occur, and where his ministry is carried on in the interim by the Church.” As such, “the boundaries are not limited to the geographical region of Galilee but extend beyond to include” areas of the Gentile world. It is likely that Mark *chose Galilee* as the setting for the story of the calling of the first four disciples, because “there does not seem to be much historical support” for the disciples’ origin occurring there rather than in some other region. For the most part, the lectionary reading from Mark focuses on Galilee because it was not regarded as a natural site of origin for a great prophet of Israel. In fact, because we know that Mark had very low regard for the disciples in general, the choice of Galilee leads a reader to see the province as one peopled by “uneducated peasants from a region *never known* for its characteristic Jewishness.” And in view of Mark’s clearly negative attitude toward the disciples (they are depicted as weak, indecisive, unfaithful, and lacking in basic intelligence), one can view the choice of location as helping to emphasize the overall weakness of the members of the “Jesus circle.” Mark here seems to identify the early disciples as “men of no particular origin, working-class, probably not very educated... (who leave their positions) without so much as a wave ‘goodbye.’” In general, in the first century, the Galileans were “lampooned by their southern brethren in Judea for being idiots and not understanding Aramaic (the language of Jesus) well.” The disciples in Mark’s gospel are presented as “foils whose stupidity and incomprehension provide opportunities for *the narrator or Jesus* to explain his mission and ideas.”

The text reveals that the calling of the disciples occurred “after John was arrested.” This is significant in that the timing of events in Mark’s account is always intentional. Here, the arrest of John and the beginning of Jesus’ ministry demonstrate that “the gospel is proclaimed and known in adversity and suffering, not in ease and comfort.” The fact that Jesus’ announcement of “good news” occurs in the immediate context of the arrest and eventual execution of the righteous John the Baptizer epitomizes Mark’s contention that the gospel was proclaimed under very auspicious conditions. John is the precursor of Jesus not only in terms of message of repentance but also “being handed over” to the authorities as well as in terms of the death each of them suffered. The verse “after John was arrested” also indicates very clearly that Jesus comes *after* John the Baptist and distinguishes his ministry from that of a precursor rather than the principal actor.

The four disciples called in this passage will be “the most important in the Gospel” of Mark. The way in which their call is treated in his gospel sends echoes ringing back through the scriptures, the larger

narrative of God's people." The Lord said to Abraham: "leave your country and your father's house and go to the land I will show you." Abram did as he was told in much the same way as the later disciples responded to the call of Jesus. "Mark is hinting to his readers and listeners that the old family business of the people of God is now being left behind. God wants a new poetry to be written and is calling a new people to write it." Jesus was now calling Peter, Andrew, James and John "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."

Give us grace, O Lord, to answer readily the call of our Savior Jesus Christ and proclaim to all people the Good News of his salvation, that we and the world may perceive the glory of his marvelous works.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,

Amen

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