

## Sermon for January 21<sup>st</sup>, 2018

Mark 1: 14 – 20

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One of my most vivid memories of Sunday School is of the singing at the beginning of our time in the hall. Much like here we would be in church for the beginning of the service: sing the first hymn, the vicar would tell us about the latest instalment of George his dog puppet's adventures and then we'd all stream out of church. In the parish lounge we'd do some singing before heading off to our classes. Mrs O'Fee played the piano accordion and we all waited to be chosen for the honour of holding up the sheets of card on which the song words were printed.

We sang "If I were a butterfly", "Jesus loves the little children". I'm sure that you could all start your own list. Somehow those songs seem to have indelibly imprinted themselves on our memories, and perhaps with them some theological ideas that we don't notice have imprinted themselves on us.

One of the songs that I can remember all the words to started off "I will make you fishers of men, fishers of men, fishers of men, I will make you fishers of men if you follow me". I don't remember if I really knew quite what that one was about. I guess in time I understood it to be about evangelism – getting people into the kingdom of heaven. Or to come to church. Or something. I don't know that I was terribly clear about the purpose.

So when I got to hear Ched Myers talking about this passage, I was intrigued to hear a completely different exposition of this morning's Gospel. I want to use that as my starting point and to think about what some of the implications for understanding that passage in a new way might be.

First, a little bit of context for the story. Mark begins his gospel by introducing John the Baptist. John is depicted as a prophet, as an outlaw, living in the wilderness. Mark doesn't say much about what happened to John,

noting at the beginning of today's reading only that these events are taking place after John was arrested.

Later in Mark's gospel

John's death and the politics involved are expounded at greater length.

But for the time being, what we know is that the prophetic leader John has vanished and that Jesus is establishing himself as that much greater one who John had said would come after him.

In some ways Mark would probably have been a pretty good storywriter for television.

The first two verses of the passage we heard today are triumphant declarations of the kingdom at hand, the time fulfilled.

But as our anticipation and excitement builds, we are frustrated.

It seems there is no triumphant moment of the kingdom appearing, but rather we cut to a picture of Jesus wandering by the large inland lake known as the Sea of Galilee. We don't even get a pensive moody moment. Instead Jesus is rounding up some of the local fishermen to go off and become "fishers of people", whatever that means. It seems like the dramatic proclamation of the kingdom has fallen kind of flat, the world still seems to be very much intact.

However, this is really a much more subversive story than you might think. Jesus is, in fact, beginning his radical ministry, seeking to turn the world upside down.

The clue is that misunderstood phrase "fishers of people".

Ched Myers writes: "This metaphor, despite the grand missionary interpretation, does not refer to the "saving of souls" as if Jesus were conferring upon these men instant evangelist status. Rather, the image is carefully chosen from Jeremiah where it is used as a symbol of Yahweh's censure of Israel" (1988: 132).

In that passage from Jeremiah the fishermen are sent to catch those who believe they can hide from God and conceal their wrongdoings.

God sends the fisherman and hunters out in order to haul in and repay those who have polluted the land with idols.

In Amos chapter 4 those who oppress the poor, or crush the needy, or are arrogant will be taken away with fishhooks.

In Ezekiel it is the powerful and the greedy who will be hauled away with a fishhook in their jaw.

Those texts give us quite a different idea about the mandate to become, as followers of Christ, fishers of people.

It is not about getting more people to come to church,  
but to challenge the things that happen in our world that run counter to the values of the kingdom.

At the beginning of this morning's liturgy we make a clear declaration about what that kingdom is like

– we say that God's reign can be characterised by justice and love.

We believe that Jesus Christ is good news for the poor, release for the captives, recovery of sight for the blind and liberty for those who are oppressed.

Jesus calls Andrew and Simon to leave their work and the family networks,  
to give up economic and social security  
to be part of working for a new world order.  
The personal is political.

So what does it mean for us to be called to be a follower of Jesus?

To be followers of Jesus is to be at odds with the status quo.

Most of us probably like things as they are.

If we are comfortable, even if we are less comfortable than we were  
twenty years ago,

we are unlikely to want to choose to deliberately make ourselves less comfortable.

Yet this is what we are asked to do.

We are asked to hold the rich and powerful to account,  
to speak up,

to write letters,

and where we are the ones who are rich and powerful,

which on the global scale is most of us,

we are called to choose for the poor,

even when it will cost us:

our time, our money or our comfort.

Some people like to grumble about political correctness.

It isn't okay to use racist language,

sexist language,

to make jokes at the expense of others.

It is difficult to speak up

when a friend or family member says something racist or sexist,

makes an off-colour joke.

We can fear the discomfort that will follow.

We can say that a bit of humour never did anyone harm.

But the way we talk and the jokes we make say a lot about our heart,  
about our values, and about how we see others.

Followers of Jesus,  
fishers of people,  
are called to love in the way that Jesus loved:  
with a heart for justice,  
with bold tongues to speak up against hurt and harm.

Follow me, Jesus said, and I will make you fishers of people.

Let us then, like Andrew and Simon,  
be ready to have our lives transformed by saying yes to this invitation.  
Follow me, Jesus said, and I will make you fishers of people.

Spoken in the name of Jesus, friend and brother of the poor. Amen.