
Fishing for People

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 21 January 2024

Jonah 3:1-5,10 • 1 Corinthians 7:29-31 • Mark 1:14-20



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

When Jesus began his ministry, he was one person, alone, with a great commission from God. He had a personal history on earth, and it was important to him. His earthly father, Joseph, we may presume to have died at some time previously. His mother is alive and involved in his life. He has brothers, and perhaps sisters, although it's not entirely clear from the Gospels. He is coming from a place and a home life which was quite commonplace, quite ordinary and understandable to the people around him. So no one expected that he would begin wandering through the countryside, preaching the Good News.

But he did not want to do it alone. He had come to teach his people, and it was important to involve his people right from the beginning. So, according to God's plan, he began to gather a band of disciples, people who would travel with him and assist him. It was common thing for a teacher, or rabbi, to gather

a group of disciples around him. It helped Jesus attract more attention, and gave him a certain legitimacy with the other people he met which he might not have established so easily if he simply travelled alone. Also, he knew that his people were like sheep without a shepherd, and he meant to be that shepherd. It was natural for people to begin following him, and again, it was expected that a teacher would gather disciples.

What was not expected was the personal power which Jesus held as the Son of God. When he called his first disciples, as related in this week's Gospel, what did they do? They immediately responded. Jesus said, "Come, follow me!" and they followed. Would they have followed just anybody? Probably not. It's likely that they had heard something by this time about this fellow Jesus, but had not seen him before. Notice that the men, Simon and Andrew, were working at their trade — they were fishermen. If a fisherman didn't work, he didn't eat. So they were not sitting idly by, but doing something very important to them, their very livelihood. Yet when Jesus said, "Come," they came.

Similarly, he called the sons of Zebedee, James and John, and they too came. They left their father and the hired hands, apparently without explanation, and walked off with Jesus and the other two. It might have gotten a little easier after that, for it's more likely a person will join a group rather than a single man — again, there was that tradition of teachers gathering disciples. James and John might have thought to themselves: "This man must have something to tell us — he already has a couple of other guys with him." The men may have all known each other as well.

But there must have been something else. Anyone might come up to you and say, "Follow me," and you'd stop and say, "Why should I?" These four men didn't, and neither did the rest of the twelve when their turn came. There must have been something about Jesus himself: some quality, some presence which had an impact on these men. It must have felt like an invitation to something wonderful. God is of course all-powerful, and could have controlled the minds of the men in a way that compelled them to follow Jesus; but I don't believe that God works that way. The very fact of the Great Commission, to go into the world and make disciples for Christ, argues that God works by invitation, and works with us, his people, to effect his will. But since God created us, surely there is a natural affinity between us and our Creator. We are attracted to the goodness and the love that is in Christ. I think that is what these men felt, and throughout the Gospel there is evidence of this, such as with Mary and Martha, with little Nicodemus, and others. They felt the attraction of holiness, of goodness.

But it didn't work with everybody! Few of the Pharisees and scribes and temple authorities seem to have felt this. Perhaps Jesus could turn it on and off,

so to speak, but I think the difference is in each person's attitude, whether their mind is open to God or not. If you have decided that you are quite happy within yourself, that you don't need anybody else, then your mind is closed in this sense. That is why I frequently say that faith is a choice: we must decide to open our minds and hearts to God, and only then will we come into relationship with God. And God chooses to come close to those who have chosen to be open to God. So Jesus chose his disciples with care, and they were thus pre-selected as people who would leave everything and follow him.

The interesting description of the men's new role, as fishers of people, is significant. As David Garland writes in his commentary on Mark:

When the 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.¹

Jesus has hooked his disciples, and they are to go with him to hook other people too. The lives of all will be changed, as they are transformed into people of God, who put God first and serve Jesus.

And what of us? All of us here have said "yes" to Jesus' call in one way or another, perhaps in our baptism, or our conversion, or at some other moment. When we baptised Scarlett last week, her parents and sponsors said "yes" for her, and she was transformed, becoming a member of God's family. We must believe that she is different being from what she was before, just as all of us are changed through God's transforming power. When I said yes to God's call, some years ago, my life was changed, and it is hard for me to imagine exactly how I was before that happened. Thanks be to God.

And again this year, as we start again with Jesus' birth and we hear again the Gospel stories about his ministry and the people he changed through his love and power, we may identify with those people and rejoice that we are part of God's family. And we may remember, and reflect, that we too are charged to be fishers of people, throwing out our lines and praying that those we hook will turn towards God, to receive God's love and blessing. Amen.

¹ Garland, David E, *The NIV Application Commentary: Mark*, (Michigan: Zondervan, 1998), p 69.