

Epiphany 3
25/1/2015

Mark the Evangelist

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

Psalm 62

1 Corinthians 7:29-31

Mark 1:14-20

On Christian Angling

[How many surrealists does it take to change a lightbulb? Fish]

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near”:
repent...believe...follow...fish. In two short lines Jesus states the call to discipleship. It is a call to all the world, and those who respond positively constitute the church. This morning we’ll focus on the last part of this call which is, in fact, more promise than call; or, as perhaps many of us hear it, more a *threat* than a call: I will make you fishers of people.

While repenting, believing and following are things which we imagine we know something about, we are much less confident about Christian angling. Certainly, it is something we seem to have become increasingly bad at. In part this is because we often have very little in the way of bait: nothing particularly worth hearing or seeing, so why would people bother taking the hook? In part the problem is that we have no real hook, our only real evangelistic effort being an open door and a church sign assuring potential visitors that they will be welcome. While the church signboard should probably not state that visitors would be unwelcome, this method of “outreach” has hardly been effective. And, in part, our missionary effectiveness is poor because many of us are missional vegetarians, thinking that it is simply wrong to fish. A fish flips and wriggles and struggles and we think we are doing it no good. Pumpkins and carrots, on the other hand – those who happen of their own volition to wander through the door – demonstrate no desire not to be consumed.

While there are other reasons for the decline of the church’s fortunes which have been out of our control, these weaknesses in our mission work exacerbate our present situation problem enormously.

In the last 20 years or so there has been a huge amount of material written about “mission” in church circles. But, while the imperative to mission has always been part of the New Testament proclamation, it seems that mission talk has become so important in recent times because of the membership crisis faced by western churches.

The problem is that this turns mission into an act of desperation: literally, an act of those without hope (*de-spes*, “without hope”). The desperation springs from concern for the church – our own experience of the church in particular: how can we restore the past church to the future? This kind of mission thinking is in fact not entirely without hope, but its hope does not spring from anything to do with the faith of the church. While mission-speak is increasingly central its left and right hands are “strategy” and “sustainability” (as in the case of the Synod’s Major Strategic Review), concepts derived from military and ecological thinking and not from a gospel understanding of mission.

But there is nothing desperate about the commissioning Jesus makes: this missionary work is not an act of desperation but an act of compassion. Whereas people generally fish for their own sake (“saving the church”), in the call of Jesus they fish for the fish’s sake: these fish *need* to be caught. If this is the case, then it is not good enough to have the wrong bait, no hook or to be missional vegetarians.

How can it be that the fish might need to be caught?

The heart of the matter is in the opening declaration in this morning’s gospel reading: the time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God has drawn near, repent and believe the good news. The gospel – specifically as *good news* – is the heart of the matter.

What then is the gospel?

It is *not*, at least for most ears in the West today, that “God loves you”. This is very poor bait in a world which scarcely gives God a thought, let alone wonders whether God cares for us. “God loves you” might be true, but it is true in the same way that soggy bread is food.

And the gospel is not that “*We* love you”, which is the thrust of welcome-sign evangelism. There is usually at least as much loving to be had outside church communities as inside, and that loving is much more conveniently timed than Sunday morning services.

The gospel is the first thing Mark records Jesus actually saying here: the kingdom of God has drawn near. Yet even this has about it the ring of disengaged religious speak, until we understand that Jesus himself is the presence of the kingdom: “Open your eyes, here it is: the presence of the kingdom of God, me, Jesus, in your midst”. For the kingdom of God is not primarily a space but a way of being in space; it is not a particular time but a certain kind of “time-liness.” The gospel is that Jesus’ way of being human – his humanity – is made available to us, draws near to us. To repent and to believe is to *embrace* this gift; to “fish for people” is to *draw others’ attention* to it.

The cutting edge of Christian evangelism – its realism and relevance to the kingdoms we already inhabit – is that the story of Jesus includes that he is crucified. This cross is a word of judgement: it is, in the first instance, our rejection of the humanity of Jesus, our preference for a different kind of kingdom. The good news of the nearness of the kingdom has, then, a corresponding bad news: the light has shone in the darkness but the people prefer the darkness (John 3). The gospel, if it is the gospel, will always “cut” because it points to the shadows which other kingdoms cast.

And there are many such kingdoms: social and political systems, economic and natural orders, racial, national and religious identities. These each have their “evangelists” as we might call them, although they often proclaim very little *good* news.

Evangelism, then – “fishing for people” – is not about injecting a religious sentiment into those who don’t seem to have one, or have the wrong one. It has to do with the realms within which we live and the humanity they imply. It has to do with the overarching realities which define us and our relationships to those around us. Evangelism, then, involves critique – of ourselves and of others – and invitation to something different. Without this relationship between the good news of the gospel and the bad news it reveals, evangelism is dead: bland bait with no hook.

The church’s ability to evangelise, then, rests on our actually holding such things to be true: holding that true humanity *is* seen in the life and manner of Jesus, that broken humanity is seen in the rejection of Jesus, and that divine grace is seen in the invitation

– even after the cross – to desire Jesus’ humanity as our own. Evangelism holds that the Spirit which matters here is not the spirit of the age but the Spirit which sealed the very humanity of Jesus himself and which Jesus himself now sends. “Follow me” is his invitation to become like him; “fishers of people” is what Jesus makes us as he makes us his own. What else could we be if we are becoming more like him?

Evangelism, then, begins with a prayer that we might know the good news ourselves, in order better to know how God deals with us, in order better to be able to tell Jesus’ story as our very own. For while we will each engage in the work quite differently, there is no repenting, no believing and no following without also going “fishing”. Or to put it the other way around – if there is no evangelism worthy of the name, then we do not yet repent, believe and follow well enough.

We pray, then, that in his surprising grace, the Father would indeed send his refreshing, cleansing, healing, life-giving Spirit, and make of us the Body of his Son, for our own sake and for the sake of all. Amen.
