

**Epiphany 3**  
**23/01/2005**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Isaiah 9:1-4**

**Psalm 27**

**1 Corinthians 1:10-18**

**Matthew 4:12-22**

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**The call of the first disciples: a new relationship is on offer**

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There are two points of intrigue in Matthew's story. The first is in connection with the encounter, which led James, John, Simon and Andrew to immediately leave what they were doing and follow Jesus. The second concerns Mrs Zebedee who does not appear at all, but later asked Jesus to seat James and John on his right and left when he came into his kingdom. Consider Mrs Zebedee. Let us imagine what it may have been like for her. She was the wife of a successful fisherman. Early in their married life there had been some bumper seasons and Zebedee was able to buy a couple of extra boats. The increased volume of catches allowed him to start a fish salting and pickling business, and he found an agent who exported their product to other parts. It was like a gift from God. During prayers in the Synagogue Mrs Zebedee often reflected on this, because "gift of God" is exactly what Zebedee's name meant. The other gift in their life was the two boys, James and John. When they were little Zebedee had servants to help work the boats. Later James and John became partners in the business: Zebedee and Sons, purveyors of fine fish. They sub-contracted to Simon and Andrew who also worked the Sea of Galilee. By that stage Zebedee's role was part time. Most days he liked to go down to see the catch come in, and sometimes gave advice regarding repairs to the boats and the nets.

One day there was a monumental change. The boys left town with Simon and Andrew. It cost Zebedee dearly. Helpers had to be found at short notice. Zebedee came out of semi-retirement, promptly put his back out, and some days Mrs Zebedee went to the shore to sort fish and mend nets. It was smelly, undignified work, the last thing she expected to do after enjoying the fruits of previous years.

No one was exactly sure what happened but the result was clear. One day Simon and Andrew brought a wandering teacher to meet James and John. They talked, and before you knew it boats, nets, Zebedee and the catch of the day were left high and dry! Mrs Zebedee discovered what had happened that evening when she went looking for her husband who was still out there cleaning up, and grappling with huge range of mixed feelings left by the boys' departure.

The parting could not have been all bad. Sources show Mrs Zebedee contributed to Jesus' support, and that her husband did not oppose her in this. But we hear nothing of her until Chapter 20 when she asks Jesus to give James and John positions of honour. It is naughty of Matthew to put it this way. Other Evangelists have the disciples asking the question, which reflects their underlying thirst for honour. In Matthew Mrs Zebedee asks, which shows she had not fully understood that Jesus' mission was grounded in his humble acceptance of the grace of God, and had nothing whatever to do with seeking status.

In relation to the four leaving, we would say anyone who changed track as radically as James, John, Simon and Andrew must have received a better offer. But as far as we can

see they were not looking for a new life. From our perspective it looks more like a great reversal of fortunes, in the wrong direction. Something in the encounter with Jesus radically changed their view of what they wanted in life. How else could they have immediately left everything and gone with him, given that they did so freely?

Bonhoeffer said 'Discipleship is not an offer [we] make to Christ. It is only [his] call, which creates the situation.' This is clear in this case. But what was in the call?

Matthew understands that when Jesus moved into "Galilee of the Gentiles" and began to preach a positive change of fortune took place for that district. It was like light shining on a dark place. People on the edge were being offered a new opportunity to know God. In respect to James, John, Simon and Andrew, there is nothing to suggest they were seeking God. But it becomes clearer that through Jesus, God was seeking them. The motivation for their leaving lies somewhere in here. When Jesus comes, he is preaching that the Kingdom of heaven is near. It is code for God is present, and the four found that something of the holy mystery we call God was indeed present in him. It was enough to persuade them that in his company life like no other could be found. Home, work and future were abandoned for an entirely new opportunity that unexpectedly came their way. It was a better offer, but it didn't look like it.

Becoming a follower Jesus begins with his call to us, as Bonhoeffer says. It is actually the offer of a gift. Experience shows there are many ways in which this happens. We find ourselves addressed through something that is said, causing us to think again about the direction of our life. Through the trauma of a death, or bad health, or a relationship break up we are forced to ask what really matters and come to different priorities. We find our selves slowly drawn to questions of faith and life and finally decide to follow the promptings of our heart; we have long wished to take a new path and an unexpected gift comes that sets us free. However the call comes to us, it does involve a decision on our part and a new undertaking. For the four it meant something specific. They were to become co-workers in a new fishing industry the mission and purpose of which was to introduce others to a new relationship with God. It also meant they, more than most, shared directly in the fate of the one they followed. Even in the Gospels an absolute change such as theirs is not demanded of all who encounter Jesus. We should not think of ourselves as having to emulate the path of the four in every detail. But the new relationship that is offered here does provoke a sorting out of what we believe really matters in life.

The call to discipleship is not at first being given a task. It begins when we see that the very best thing we could wish for is being given to us. This is a beautiful and yet dangerous gift. Beautiful, because it is of God, and dangerous because acceptance of it has the power to redefine everything else we hold to be important. It is radical, like moving from life in a dark space to life in the light.

When we hear of the four leaving we may think we could not measure up to their degree of certainty and commitment, but don't forget the rest of the story. The 12, the ones first regarded as disciples, were marked by certain qualities. They were humble folk rather than clever, and they were definitely a mixed band. They had their doubts and fears and, like Mrs Zebedee, didn't always get the point. Judas was notably a betrayer, but in the end they all ran away. We call the first 12 disciples, but later the term was applied to all believers, members of the church who are called by Christ to share in his mission. Our role may not be to leave home but it is still to draw others into the new relationship God continues to offer us through Jesus Christ.

A friend of mine has a church in Perth, located much as this one is, in the inner city. We

often joke because in 1982 we were both inducted into new churches and he is still in that place whereas I have shifted many times. But he has had to make many inner journeys, and worked through profound social changes that have affected the life of that church. The congregation still bubbles along and new people keep on coming. I sometimes say to him: you keep on doing the people work and it shows. Those who come seeking meaning, community or some form of help find themselves gathered in and supported, in a context of word, sacrament and community, and so the church lives.

As a congregation we are reminded that fishing for people is still a central part of the our calling. For the future we cannot do less than consider how we will aim to reach out to others, and welcome those who come to find us, that the new relationship God offers us all will be nurtured, shared, and grow in strength, to the glory of God.