

Epiphany 3
23/01/2011

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 9:1 - 4

Psalms 27

1 Corinthians 1:10 - 18

Matthew 4:12 - 23

After John had been arrested...

Today's Gospel contains an ending followed by a new beginning that brought fresh opportunities for many. John was arrested; Jesus moved to a new location and a new phase of life began. We should not underestimate the power and significance of this moment. One epoch ends here and a new one begins. The world has not been the same since.

What Matthew aims to tell us is that when Jesus moved into Galilee and began calling for people to repent - "turn around" a new work of God was underway. New opportunities are on offer; a new gift of wholeness was available to the people of the world on an inclusive basis. In order to show how those not usually considered are included Matthew refers to Isaiah who prophesied a day when light would shine for people trapped in occupied territories, the land inhabited by the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali. No more gloom for those who were in anguish, said Isaiah. This is a radical change the order of which meant that past history would not be allowed to determine the future for those suffering contempt. As in the Exodus, divine action was moving on human power to break the yoke of oppression and bring liberty in place of bondage.

The day when history turned came when John was arrested. From that time Jesus entered territory characterized by darkness and alienation to announce the Kingdom of heaven (the presence of God) had come near. He called people to align their lives afresh with God. In this new work those who were trapped: described here as the sick and the diseased, basically social and political underdogs were offered a new way of life. The light had begun to shine in a dark place.

We read that Jesus called disciples. Normally it was the other way round. Those who wanted to learn something sought out a teacher, but here the teacher sought them. The change is crisp and dramatic. Follow me: he said, and immediately four people turned from all that was familiar and went off with a complete stranger. The ministry of the Kingdom had begun.

Their immediate response indicates they recognized the moment before them as being of ultimate significance. This was the best offer to be found. This makes it all the more clear that what happened was not their invention. And there is nothing to say they were special or deserving of this. They moved because of an encounter that carried within it the promise of a new beginning.

Bonhoeffer said: when Jesus calls us he calls us to die. This is an important statement. But fundamentally the call of Jesus is the call to live a new life. That is why it is an opportunity not to be missed. Simon, Andrew, James and John left their boats and nets. They allowed themselves to be led and taught by Jesus who showed them how to bring others into the new epoch that was emerging in the world. It is for this and no other reason we know their names today.

This is not a story about heroes. It is a story about the presence and power of God who works within the lives of ordinary people to overthrow human expectations about security and stimulate deep and abiding new agendas for living.

When we look at our own lives we see that sometimes change takes place slowly and imperceptively. On other occasions we are driven to change by rising levels of pain or catastrophic events. And sometimes we change because a reversal of fortunes offers us a new and positive opportunity.

One thing we can be sure of is that it comes to us each of us differently, and it means different things for different people and congregations. What is important here is that we enter into discipleship, not in our own strength, but through a sense of having been encountered, called or lead. That may sound exalted, but if we stop to think about it, we already know what this is like because we've been through our own points of transformation.

We may have travelled through passages of darkness and alienation where we felt disenfranchised, trapped and lost. And perhaps from within that something pressed on us in such a way that we found ourselves facing up to and acting on things that had been put off for years. Or perhaps something we have always wanted came to us: recognition; professional success; a life companion, and we knew in our bones that here was a turning point, the beginning of a new path to life.

We hear this story every year at this time because discipleship is not a one off event. It is an ongoing process of lifelong growth into Christ. Individually, and as a congregation, we must continue to listen attentively for the points where we are called to launch out in new ways for the sake of the Gospel. That is no more urgent than as the New Year gathers pace before us. We are not the same group who met this time last year. Some have gone, others have come, and this is itself a new horizon of opportunity for us as a community. What discipleship means for us in this New Year is something we must continue to reflect on and respond to afresh.

The call of Jesus isn't necessarily something pious or mystical. The four by the lake were encountered in the middle of their daily life. Later in the Gospel we see how some who were called returned to their homes while here they left everything and went away. Stay or go, what was common to them was that all of them started to live according to new concerns, which involved drawing people into the wide net of God's love for the world. People fishing, as it was called: openhearted hospitality, which graciously and generously conveyed to others God's interest in them, and invites them to share God's endless gift of life.

What our reading challenges us to think about is this: all of us have an equivalent to mending the nets alongside the lake of our life. In this very place God awaits us. Challenging, beckoning, calling us to accept the offer of a new path to life. And the question is: are ready to say a fresh yes to the invitation?
