

Epiphany 3
22/1/2012

Mark the Evangelist

Jonah 3:1 – 5, 10

Psalm 62

I Corinthians 7:25 – 31

Mark 1:14 - 20

The time is fulfilled: three responses to the call of God

The Sundays after Epiphany tell of how the light that broke forth at Christmas continues to shine calling people to live in its enlightening power. Those who catch a glimpse of this light joyfully begin to live according to new priorities. Such a change is what is meant by repentance: turning from an old way to a new.

Jonah is a well-known preacher of repentance. We do not know whether he existed, or whether the humorous book in his name is linked to real events. What is clear is that his is *a story told for a purpose*. We know how Jonah fled from the call of God, got caught on a boat in a storm, was thrown overboard and survived three days inside a big fish. He discovered he could not flee from God's Spirit. He finally embraced God's call and delivered a doomsday message of judgement to Ninevah, a Gentile city inhabited by Israel's most recent oppressive and violent enemy.

Jonah's preaching was a great success. The people repented, and so did God, who forgave the Ninevites. But Jonah sulked. The story is a bold statement about the extent of the sovereignty of Israel's God whose grace works through even reluctant prophets. God, who does not wish violence and injustice to be in the world, has a capacity for judgement and yet is not an uncaring tyrant, a closed principle of fate bound to an infallible decree. God is truly free, acting graciously and mercifully when people show themselves willing to re-order their lives in response to the Word delivered to them.

Jesus was a preacher of repentance who called people to be his disciples. His message was positive and enlightening: *the time is fulfilled*. When oppression ruled and God seemed defeated, a new light began to shine, revealing that the reign of God was near. It was good news. God is actively present in the world. The most important thing is near at hand. Grace and mercy has come towards us, challenging us to a change of heart. It was the best news. But it was judgement in the sense that it cast a new light on all present goals and priorities and lead to radical refocussing. It happened to the four fishermen. It involved trusting that a special opportunity was available to them in the one who called them. They left everything, attached themselves to Jesus and became living, embodied signs of the reign of God.

The time is fulfilled. Much of the New Testament is concerned with knowing whether or not the time has come. Our thoughts about time are usually concerned with chronology: minutes and hours, days and years. We must go to bed, get up, keep our appointments go on holidays. There is another understanding of time: *kairos* - the time of opportunity. We experience it when something happens that impacts us in such a way that all our priorities are reshaped. It happened here last year. But we know it in other ways. There is an accident that brings huge losses. We are waiting for the results of tests, and the diagnosis releases us from our worst fears. Something we always wanted becomes available or an opportunity we never dreamed of opens up. These are urgent moments, moments of crisis in which time takes on a new density and may seem to stand still. Something happens to us that put the rest of our life in a new perspective and we have to work out what it is that really matters.

In Jonah and Mark the call of God to live as Kingdom people is the time of opportunity. The call did not come once and for all. As times changed, as life evolved, even as it unravelled completely the challenge to live the Gospel came again. For the fishermen the challenge of being kingdom people became a life work: a question they answered afresh each day.

Compared with the other readings Corinthians seems to take us in a different direction. *Now concerning virgins*, said Paul, *I think it is well for you to remain as you are* [1Cor 7:25-26]. Jesus himself said almost nothing about chastity. Unfortunately Paul did. His words have become a key resource in the church's teaching about celibacy, especially in relation to the clergy. Thanks to the use people such as St Jerome and St Augustine made of Paul's words the idea grew that virginity was superior to marriage. Eventually, after a complicated process, in 1139 the Western Church declared the marriage of clergy illegal. Ironically, Protestants, who are fiercely committed to Paul, dismantled celibacy and since the 16th century have made no provision for virginity at all. Marriage and family life have always been to the fore with us, and little thinking has been done about singleness as a chosen option for a life of service. The Reformation may have been right to topple virginity from pride of place, but its removal from our church altogether was based on a limited view of the call of God. We have no understanding of celibacy as a gift, nor do we have a structured option for singleness as a basis for loving service of others.

Many people stumble at the church's teaching on celibacy, and assume Paul is caught in an unhealthy dualism between body and soul. But what may now be read is a life denying approach to sex, celibacy or the marriage of clergy is really about something else.

Paul makes it clear that his views on virginity are only his opinion, not a word from the Lord. At the centre of his thought is the belief that the gracious presence of God is at work for all people, through good times and bad, offering Jews and Gentiles a new beginning through Jesus Christ who was dead but now lives. This message offered his hearers the possibility of living in this transforming power, an option that even then did not depend on the "shortness of the time". Paul, however, is moved by a deep sense of urgency about this message, which puts pressure on the deepest and most sensitive questions we have to face in life. It is true he thought the reign of God would be completed soon, and we no longer live by his timetable. But what matters is that, for the sake of being free to remain true to the call of God and serve without distraction, Paul is willing to put all other commitments under scrutiny. What he wanted was for people to live in the world and offer spiritual service to others, without being engrossed in the demands of the world, or exposed to excessive anxiety. If people felt called to discipleship and were able to remain single that was good. If they were married, that was good. Married or single, what mattered was their focus on being Kingdom people who sought every day to live as embodied signs of the reign of God.

The long memory of the church includes terrific stories of those who were able to choose the option of virginity. St Antony of the Desert and St Agnes of Rome, both of whom are commemorated this week, are just two to mention. But the take home message is not that we should all be like them in their virginity. What matters is that we too are ready to let our priorities in life be directed by the Gospel, so that we live in the world freely, and are not engrossed by it.

The key figure in Alex Miller's novel *Autumn Laing* is a woman of artistic temperament, whose father does not relate to her gift but is obsessed with making money. Her gift means she struggles for recognition in a context where her father is driven by material concerns, has no feel for her or her art and would prefer it if she dropped it all and became like him. He is so engrossed in looking after his money he has no time to spare. She cannot repent of the inner voice that directs her artistic interests. And she can do nothing to cause her father to turn from his pursuits to recognise and value her. The call her inner life continues to beckon her towards the life that is meant to be, competing with the distractions of the outer world, which seek to crush her more sensitive impulses.

While this is a secular story, and its ultimate outcome may not fit our values, discipleship involves a struggle rather like that. We know the things that call us and the things that distract us, and how hard it is to stay on the path. But we have before us the figure of Jesus, who embodied the values God wants the world to share, and continues to be for us, a permanent sign that choosing his way, whatever that means for us, is indeed the way to life.
