

immediately, to follow Elijah and eventually (2 Kings 2:13) receive Elijah's mantle as a prophet. The call of Jesus' disciples is similar to this, but because Jesus was God's Son and no mere prophet, the response called for was more immediate, more decisive and more complete.

We cannot sit back and imagine that it was easy for Simon, Andrew, James and John to respond to Jesus in this way, but they were faced with Jesus Christ the Saviour, and their simple and absolute response has spoken to Christians throughout two thousand years. It challenges people who have never accepted the call of Christ to do so, and it challenges those who have always gone to church to ask whether they have truly responded to Christ with the immediate, complete and decisive response which the Lord looks for from His people.

Application

I have sat through discussions within churches over many years in which good and godly people say that they have never had any 'great light' experience of faith (as with Paul on the road to Damascus - see Acts 9:1f.), but they justify their beliefs and their church practise based upon the heritage of faith they have received. To a certain extent, I feel I have little to add to such debates and do not always join in. Certainly, Paul's Damascus Road experience was important for the life of the church, but as far as being a disciple of Christ is concerned, the call of Christ to Simon, Andrew, James and John seems to me to be a far more challenging measure of true faith and discipleship. Whatever our personal experience of coming to faith or growing into it in the life of the church, the challenge of our passage today remains clear and absolute. Am I immediately, completely and decisively committed to Jesus? There are no greys with which to answer this question, and I must either answer 'yes' or 'no'.

If this passage of Scripture has any value in the life of God's Church today, then it must surely be to face Christian people with the same call of discipleship again. Whatever gloss we like to put on our churchgoing, our faith, our churchmanship or our preferred style of worship in church, it is only when people answer 'yes' to the absolute call of God that the real church of God becomes visible and the Kingdom of God on earth is extended.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss why Jesus chose to call fishermen as his first followers.
2. Does Jesus commonly ask people to leave everything including family and work, to follow Him today?
3. Do you believe that it can be harmful to leave everything and start a 'new life' with Christ, from the point of view of those left behind?

Discipleship

The simplest response to this passage is to decide one's own response to Jesus' call. Am I immediately, completely and decisively committed to Jesus? (see above). Whatever your response to this question, try writing this down on a piece of paper, or some similar phrase which expresses how the disciples responded to Jesus, and placing it in your own Bible in Mark's Gospel. Use it as a bookmark in the Gospel so that as you read the coming incidents in the Gospel, you are reminded of the sacrificial response of the disciples which enabled Jesus' ministry to begin. You may find this helps to illuminate the text.

Final Prayer

Stay with us, Lord, through all the dangers and perils of this day. Give us such a firm grasp of You that we do not let you down, and hold on to us with all the might of Your love and Your Holy Spirit, we pray. And when the day ends, give us rest. Thank You, Lord. AMEN

Prayer

Almighty God, may we always be ready for the releasing of Your power through the Gospel. Give us a longing to see You work in our midst, and an expectation that great things will be achieved. Give us a heart to join with You in the Gospel work of salvation and deliverance, and the joy of Your presence as we work together in this great and Godly task. Thank You, Almighty God; AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Looking Ahead

Pray for the year ahead, that people might hear God's Word of Love and Justice;

- In the world of politics
- Within business
- In public services
- In the Judiciary
- In small businesses

Pray according to your knowledge of these, and add to this list as you are led in your prayers.

Meditation

When life is quiet, Lord, fill my mind with what is good;
And keep the enemy away from my thoughts and feelings.

When life is routine, Lord, give me the concentration I need
To pay attention to the detail of what I do, and honour You with my work.

When life becomes difficult, Lord, save me from panicking;
Help me to focus on You, and trust in Your spiritual guidance.

When life is horrendous, Lord, give me the courage to hold firmly to You;
Drawing from Your Spirit the energy I need to get through every trouble.

When life becomes easier, Lord, may I not forget You or Your love;
But remember Your faithfulness through good times and bad.

When life is quiet, Lord, fill my mind with what is good;
Keep me alert, and prepare me, in faith, for all that's to come.

Bible Study - Mark 1:16-20

¹⁶ As Jesus passed by the Sea of Galilee, He saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. ¹⁷ Jesus said to them, 'Come and follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.' ¹⁸ They left their nets immediately, and followed Him. ¹⁹ When He had gone a little farther, He saw James, the son of Zebedee, and his brother John; they were in a boat mending the nets. ²⁰ Jesus called them straight away, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired labourers and followed Him.

Review

This brief and powerful story about the calling of the first disciples begins the story of Jesus' active ministry in Mark's Gospel. We have been given a compelling summary of what God wanted Jesus to do in the previous verses (1:9-14), and the way in which Jesus began His work by calling disciples demonstrates a significant point about how God works within His world. He chooses to work with people, and he does this irrespective of human perspectives about personality, general suitability and background.

Many things have been said about this passage, and many sermons have been preached upon it. However, we cannot read these words without recalling that the man who was called first, named Simon (later Peter), was the man who spoke out bravely and boldly only a few years later at Pentecost. He delivered a stunning sermon (Acts 2) that effectively began the church, and he guided this growing band of people through their earliest and most formative years. In addition, Simon Peter's brother Andrew became the man who did more than most to introduce people to Jesus (see John 1:40, 6:8, 12:22), James became a prominent leader of the church, and John became the disciple who was possibly closest to Jesus during His life (John 21:7,20). All four of them started out in life as country fishermen. Their lives may well have been satisfying and interesting before they met Jesus, but without His call, all of them would have spent the rest of their natural lives doing the same work and being tied to the same family and social groups from which they came in Galilee. Because of Jesus' call, they became the people God used to change the world forever through the Gospel of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit. The immensity of what happened to these four men has fascinated people ever since, and the story of their call to follow Jesus remains one of the most popular stories of the New Testament.

We only have the bare bones of this wonderful story of the call of the first disciples; Mark has cut it right back to the minimum of information, just like the baptism of Jesus we have just read (1:9-11). Because of this, there is little we can say with any certainty about these four men. We are forced to remember that God delights to work with all kinds of people, and His choice can never be subject to human scrutiny, especially where a special and unique work of God's grace is at stake. When Abraham was chosen by God to be the forefather of the people of Israel, the Old Testament tells us nothing about him which might distinguish him from anyone else of his day; we only know that he was chosen by God (Genesis 11:31-12:3), just as Simon, Andrew, James and John were chosen.

Also, the story of the calling of the first disciples is swift. Mark tells us that Simon and Andrew 'left their nets immediately' (1:18), and that James and John were called 'straight away' (1:20). Yesterday, we noticed the speed with which everything happened once Jesus was baptised, and there is no let up in the pace here! The task of saving the world was immediate and urgent. Jesus was not being cruel by asking these first four disciples to leave everything immediately; what Jesus had in mind for them to do could not wait. God's plan of salvation was His urgent response to sin and evil in the world.

Simon, Andrew, James and John, were simple people, merely driven along by God's Spirit to do what Jesus wanted of them like puppets. Each had individuality and character, and they responded because Jesus' spiritual power and authority drew them, but this is all Mark wants us to know. The whole incident speaks about the divine power of Jesus and the unconditional response of humanity, and this is the starting place for God's great work of salvation in the world.

Going Deeper

If we go deeper into the story, we must look for this spiritual potential in Simon, Andrew, James and John, and in the mission of Jesus who called them. Jesus called the first disciples out of their worldly life and into the spiritual life of the Kingdom of God, but it was not a spiritual life of ideas and thoughts. It was a spiritual life which required the disciples to take the direct action of leaving behind everything of their past so that God could use them to build a new future for the world through His Kingdom.

'Come, follow me ...'

At the heart of this simple story is Jesus' dramatic call of the four fishermen to 'come and follow me ...' (1:17). In those days, a Rabbi did not choose his followers, the followers chose the rabbi they wished to follow. So this complete reversal of the world's values is the first thing we should notice because it signals so much of what is to come in Mark's Gospel. Jesus frequently turned human values upside down to demonstrate God's purposes and the nature of the

Kingdom. For example, when Jesus was asked who was greatest in the Kingdom, he took hold of a child (9:33-36) and held him up for all to see!

There is no simple or easy way for us to understand the magnitude of the spiritual power and authority of Jesus in calling the disciples, because what Simon, Andrew, James and John did was complete nonsense from every human point of view. Personally, they abandoned their homes and family; Mark even mentions that James and John left their father with 'hirelings', unreliable paid labourers who were normally used to provide cover for family businesses when members of a family were unable to fulfil their usual duties. In a religious sense, the disciples acted rashly, for they had no real knowledge of what Jesus had in store for them, and there is no indication that they knew anything about Jesus' teaching or even His preaching (see 1:14,15). Lastly, we know little of what went on between Jesus and the disciples; what body language or even what discussion (with the exception of Jesus' pun about fishing for men 1:17 – see below). We are simply told that they heard the call and followed.

However much we would love to know more about what happened (and Luke's Gospel does give a bigger possible scenario for what happened – see Luke 5:1-11), Mark's minimalist story helps us to accept that this is how God calls people. A time for decision comes, and a 'Yes' or a 'No' is required; either someone says 'yes' and goes Christ's way to follow Him, or they say 'no' and return to their own familiar ways. However much we dress up the call to Christian discipleship today, this stark challenge represents the heart of the matter, as it does in Mark's story.

Come and do some work!

What we cannot avoid is the fact that Mark describes a basic call to discipleship which is not simply a call to follow Jesus blindly, it is a call to do some work! Jesus said 'come and follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.' (1:17) There is little choice for those who translate this text into English because this is almost exactly what the Greek words in Mark 1:17 say. It was clearly a pun on the trade of the first disciples; yes, Jesus may have been laughing as he asked them to stop fishing for fish and fish for people with him!

However, there was a serious side to what Jesus said. He spoke to the disciples using the language they knew, the banter of fishermen going about their work, not the theological language of rabbis, Pharisees or scribes. In our own day, some have noted that there are a number of Old Testament prophetic texts which speak about fishermen catching people instead of fish, and they are all somewhat negative. Jeremiah, for example, speaks of the Lord sending fishermen and hunters amongst the people of Israel to catch sinners to make them face the consequences of their sins (Jer 16:16; see also Ez. 29:4, Amos 4:2, Hab1:14-17). It is easy enough for us to understand these prophecies for what they are, and we do not have to attempt to tie them to this passage and what Jesus called the disciples to do in the Kingdom of God using fishermen's banter. We know from the whole of Mark's Gospel that Jesus wanted to reach out and catch all people, indeed, all sinners, offering repentance and the forgiveness of sins (1:14,15). However, no hearts or minds could be touched unless those who God called went out and 'caught' people's attention with this amazing 'good news'. Jesus disciples were called to follow Him not just in the unknown future which lay ahead, but in the practical work of what Jesus was doing at that time, which was 'catching' the attention of people to the Gospel, the 'Good News' of God..

The disciple's response

The response of the disciples was decisive, complete and immediate. This threesome would make a good three-point sermon on this passage. When Jesus, in later times, preached to the crowds about letting go of the past and following God's path for their lives completely and without reservation (see 3:31-34, 8:34-9:1), He did not say this with the example of His own life in mind, but that of the disciples who travelled with Him as well. Their decisive, complete and immediate response assisted the message Jesus preached.

In the Old Testament there is one great example of the call of a disciple, and that is the call of Elisha by Elijah (1 Kings 19:19-21). In that instance, Elijah called Elisha to follow him, but Elisha requested permission to go and say farewell to his family before he returned,