**Mark 1:14-20**

**Fishers of People**

What does it mean to be a follower of Jesus? What does Jesus want from us as his followers? What type of a church does God want St. Andrew’s to be?

These are three questions that I was asking in my sermon a couple of weeks ago and today, in the week leading up to the launch of our new Mission Action Plan, I want to re-visit these questions again but this time from a slightly different angle.

Last time, we thought about the Great Commission in Matthew 28, where Jesus said to his disciples, “Go and make disciples…” The Great Commission, not the Great Suggestion. And these were Jesus’ last words to his disciples before he ascended to heaven. Today, we are going right back to the start of Jesus’ ministry and thinking about his first words to his disciples as recorded in Mark’s Gospel, chapter 1.

We join the story just after the baptism of Jesus and he has then spent 40 days in the wilderness, being tempted by Satan. And now, after that experience, he is ready to begin his public ministry. Jesus comes back out of the wilderness and is now in public circulation again, as verse 14 tells us: “After John had been arrested, Jesus went into Galilee.” According to Mark, the ministry of John the Baptist is completed, the announcement and preparations for the Messiah are completed, and now it’s time for Jesus to take centre stage.

And so Jesus appears and gives his first public words in ministry, which set up everything that he would stand for, everything that he would live and die for, verse 15, Jesus says this: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

This is quite a difficult verse, because what does ‘come near’ actually mean? Does it mean that the kingdom of God is here, now, or that it is almost here, just over the horizon, as it were? If we take an honest look at the state of the world today, let alone 2000 years ago, it would be hard to argue that the kingdom of God is here in its totality. And yet we do want to believe that it is, in some sense, already here.

Well, the meaning of this verse hinges on the Greek word used for ‘time’: “The time is fulfilled…” As I’ve mentioned before, there are two different words in Greek for ‘time’, and they both carry very different meanings. Mark does not use the word ‘chronos’ for ‘time’ here; ‘chronos’ indicating a moment in historical time, a date on the calendar, an hour in the day…Instead, he uses the word ‘kairos’, which still means ‘time’ but is more to do with the eternal quality inherent in any given moment. So Jesus does not announce the historical moment in time when the kingdom of God came to earth. Instead, he is alerting us to the possibility of encountering the kingdom of God at any given moment in historical time, if we repent and believe.

Whenever you repent, whenever you believe, the time is fulfilled in you. That can be a one-off moment, a date marked on the calendar when you became a Christian. But it is also a continuous activity, that we may repeat many times each day when we continually repent of wrongdoing, when we continually struggle to believe. And, as we do, the kingdom of God is fulfilled in us as we enter more deeply into the eternal truth of God.

So having proclaimed the essence of this eternal encounter, Jesus is now in a position to make approaches to individuals and ask them to live out that call in their own lives. And so we see this first such encounter, in verse 16, with Simon and Andrew and then, in verse 19, with James and John

In Mark’s account, we don’t learn anything about these four men. All we see is four men being taken away from their personal and professional lives in response to the call of Jesus upon them.

And what are they called to? What does Jesus call us to? In the Great Commission, at the end of his ministry, he told the disciples to “Go and make disciples”. And here, right at the beginning of his ministry, he says pretty much the same thing - but Jesus uses a really odd metaphor here! “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” We are so used to this phrase, “I will make you fishers of men” some know it as, we know it so well that we don’t even think of it as a bit odd. But actually, I think it is…

There is a similar passage in Jeremiah 16:16 – “I am now sending for many fishermen, says the Lord, and they shall catch them”. But in that context, the fishermen are invading armies who will fish for the unfaithful people of Israel and destroy them!

And secondly, what happens to a fish when it is caught? It dies! Does our fishing for people result in their spiritual death? Is the church full of spiritually dead people?

And thirdly, a fish doesn’t want to be caught and is pulled on board the boat unwillingly. So are we to force people into church and force them into a relationship with God through which they will only encounter spiritual death?

When you break this metaphor down, it really is a bit odd and doesn’t really seem to speak of kindness and compassion in evangelism and mission!

So let’s try and get below the skin of this call and try to read it with fresh eyes and without all the preconceptions that we bring to it about evangelism and mission.

These first disciples would probably have heard of Jesus: he was, after all, walking round Galilee proclaiming the kingdom of God and as Galilean fishermen, they would probably have either seen him in action or at the very least have heard about him. They would also, perhaps, have heard of John the Baptist’s proclamation that Jesus was mightier than he was. And, as good Jews, they would probably have been aware of the Jeremiah 16:16 verse where spiritual fishing meant overcoming God’s enemies.

So what would have been going through their heads when they decided to leave all behind and follow this new, radical teacher who had come back to Galilee from out of the wilderness?

Simply this…Power and Authority.

These fishermen were powerless men, fairly poor men, looking forward only to a life of daily grind to earn a living under the regime of the Roman Empire.

And here was a man in their midst, a man declared by John as a mighty judge, now using a phrase that seems to indicate that those who follow him will share in his power and authority and right to judge others.

Perhaps Peter and Andrew, James and John fundamentally misunderstood the call and believed it to be the way out of their poverty and powerlessness. Here was a call to a new life in which they would have power and authority and would be respected by everyone as a result. They didn’t really know who Jesus was, and they didn’t understand the implications of his ministry, but they had a hunch that following him would be the way for them to achieve power, authority, glory and respect.

And, of course, that was a fundamental misunderstanding that stayed with them throughout the rest of their time with Jesus, as recorded in Mark’s gospel: Fighting over who would be sitting on Jesus’ left and right in heaven; Refusing to serve others but wanting to be served; Not understanding that they had to die in order to live; Shooing away the children from Jesus so they could have more time with him; Enjoying the entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday; Rejoicing at the turning over of the tables in the Temple…and then being utterly distraught at the crucifixion; running away from the authorities; refusing to stand with Jesus in his hour of need; going back to their fishing boats after the crucifixion.

Peter and Andrew, James and John were called by Jesus to fish for people and the ambiguity of that phrase led them to fundamentally misunderstand their call, and that resulted in the spiritual struggles that they had to work through over the coming years.

I think we need to redeem this passage for what it is, rather than just see in it a simplistic call to mission and evangelism, which is what we have turned it into in the modern-day church.

The call of Jesus on our lives is completely counter-cultural; it goes completely against our expectations of what it should be, it turns our whole world on its head.

Following Jesus does not take us where we expect to go…

And that, perhaps, is the theme running throughout the story we are looking at here: there is a certain violence and shock involved in this new spirituality to which we are all called. At the baptism of Jesus, heaven and earth have been united in him, the heavens are ripped apart in a most unexpected way, just as the curtain in the temple will apart in the most unexpected way a few years later. Jesus was then driven out into the wilderness where he had to encounter emptiness and solitude, caught in a space between the beasts and the angels. John the Baptist was violently taken out of the story so that Jesus can announce a moment of crisis for each one of us as we have to choose to engage with this moment of fulfilment in our lives that will ultimately turn our world upside down:

We want to experience power and authority and be respected for who we are, but we will be taken the way of the cross instead and will be called to die in order to live.

This part of Mark’s Gospel should leave us feeling very uncomfortable about what it means to be a Christian. We are not called to an easy life, we are not called to power and authority but to a tough life that will constantly surprise us and challenge us. Mark wants to tell us a story in which Jesus constantly calls his disciples to a new way of living and they constantly misunderstand what that means for themselves.

We are called to constantly assess why we are followers of Christ and what it is that we want to get out of this lifestyle we have chosen…

Are we seeking honour and glory and power and authority and respect or are we prepared to walk the way of the cross and all that this will mean for us in our everyday lives?

As we unfold our new MAP next week, our new Mission Action Plan, we will be stepping out in faith as a church community to try and follow where God is taking us. And it is a bold and ambitious Mission Action Plan: there will be many risks and we will need to be courageous as we move forward over the next decade as a church family.

But we believe that we are moving in the power of God’s Holy Spirit and so we can be confident in that.

The message from this story in Mark’s Gospel is that Jesus does not always take us the way we expected to go but that’s OK, because we are safe in the loving arms of God.

Perhaps this week, we can all give some thought and prayer to how we might re-commit ourselves as followers of Jesus and re-commit ourselves to the mission and ministry of our church family here at St. Andrew’s.