

The First Disciples Encounter Jesus

Mark 1:14-20

After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!"

Jesus has been baptised by John, God's Spirit has come upon him, and he has spent forty days in the desert, where he was faced with temptations from the devil. He then makes his way to Galilee, where his public ministry was to begin. Luke's gospel tells us that he went 'in the power of the Spirit'.

During the time Jesus was being tempted in the desert, the devil had a really good go at trying to undermine Jesus' security in his identity as God's Son. But as we know, the devil didn't win that battle. When Jesus' public ministry began, he knew exactly who he was, and exactly what he was called to do.

John the Baptist had, as he had said himself, 'prepared the way' through his preaching of baptism for the forgiveness of sins. John recognised Jesus as the messiah, and would no doubt have been encouraging his followers to keep a close eye and ear on what Jesus might be about to do or say.

Here in Mark's gospel, Jesus proclaims the good news in a powerful way. It's an missional message with three parts to it:

Firstly, "*The time has come*" - a testimony to the perfect timing of a trustworthy God;

Next he says, "*The kingdom of God has come near*" - Jesus himself, fully God and fully man, brings heaven and earth close together in a way that it has not been since mankind first sinned and broke the relationship between humans and God;

The third part of his message is: "*Repent and believe the good news!*" - calling all to turn from their wicked ways, to live righteous lives and put their trust in God's message of salvation.

Jesus' ministry started by going to the Synagogues. Luke's gospel tells us of how he at first impressed everybody with his teaching, but they very quickly got upset with him because of the way he was suggesting that God might actually want to make Himself known to everybody, not just God's chosen people.

It wasn't long before Jesus was no longer welcome in the temples and the synagogues because his message simply didn't line up with the very specific,

religious rules of the Pharisees, teachers and rabbis of the time. From the start of his ministry, Jesus' message was a radical one, and to many, especially those on the fringes, it was very attractive.

People were already beginning to gather in large numbers to hear him teach. Jesus would have been gathering a reputation as the messiah that the Jewish people had been expecting for so long.

As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of men." At once they left their nets and followed him.

So Jesus begins to call people to follow him – he starts inviting people who he has hand picked to be part of his close discipleship circle. He was already becoming established as a teacher, he was already gathering a reputation as someone with a new message. When Jesus approached Simon and Andrew, it is entirely possible that they had a very good idea of who he was, and what he had been teaching up to that point. It's even possible that they had heard John the Baptist's teaching earlier, and had been encouraged to keep an eye out for Jesus.

As Simon and Andrew were invited to leave their nets behind and follow Jesus, they would have understood what they were being asked to do. It wasn't as if they thought "Sure thing, I've not got anything better to do. Should be good for a laugh."

They were being invited to join a team which would have a mission attached to it. They were being offered a task, rather than a way out of what they were already involved in.

The language that Jesus uses here in Mark's gospel not only relates to those he calls, but it is also in part prophetic. The idea of 'fishing' for God's kingdom can be found back in the book of Jeremiah chapter 16, where God speaks through the prophet about how He will restore the land to His people:

"But now I will send for many fishermen," declares the LORD, "and they will catch them. After that I will send for many hunters, and they will hunt them down on every mountain and hill and from the crevices of the rocks.

The prophet was talking about the gathering of people for judgement, and here in Mark's gospel we now see Jesus calling literal fishermen to be a part of God's plans to see His people saved.

Jesus was not calling these fishermen out of a difficult situation into an easy one. They were working steady jobs. It might have been hard work, but it was reliable work – fish was big business.

In the same way, we should not assume or pretend that to become a Christian is to have all our problems solved.

The truth is, sometimes things might even seem to get worse – we do, after all, have an enemy who is determined to keep us out of relationship with God. To follow Christ is hard, but it is totally satisfying – often in ways we don't even know.

When he had gone a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets. Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.

Without delay, he called them, and they left.

Just like Simon and Andrew, James and John respond to Jesus' call by reacting immediately. Have we done the same? Just like these fishermen, many of us are well aware of Jesus, who he is, and what he says, but have we truly responded to his call – or have we chosen to happily accept that Jesus is there somewhere on the horizon of our lives, but we still want some more time to think about it all. The disciples, rightly in this situation, didn't think about it, or wait for some kind of confirmation – they heard Jesus call them and they followed. It's as simple as that.

To follow Jesus didn't – and doesn't – come cheap. Although freely we have received his love and salvation, it still comes with a cost.

We turn around, and stop living for ourselves. We choose to put God first in everything.

“Simon and Andrew left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.” - they left their family and livelihood behind for the sake of following Jesus wherever he led them.

When Jesus calls us, not only does he call us to follow him, but he calls us to be different. He accepts us as we are, but his holiness and purity compels us to change.

To be a Christian, to follow Jesus, is a belief system and it is a lifestyle. It's not a case of “either/or”, but it is actually a case of “both/and”.

Christianity is not *either* a belief system *or* a lifestyle.

If it is *only* a belief system, the mind is strong on what is known to be truth, with a thankfulness to God for our spiritual nature, but lacks room for growth and change.

If it is *only* a lifestyle choice, then the belief system is seen as archaic and irrelevant. Buy the CDs and the latest study bibles, go to the right conferences and listen to the up-and-coming speakers, but again, without a set of standards in place there is no room for growth or change.

Christianity is *both* a belief system *and* a lifestyle.

It is a belief system, one that teaches us what God tells us is right and wrong, so we are able to seek after purity and holiness in our daily walk.

And it is also a lifestyle. They go hand in hand. They react to each other. What we believe influences our lifestyle, and our lifestyle affirms what we believe. It's a life giving interaction, which causes us to grow, and to be changed and transformed.

Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them. As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him.

As Jesus continues to gather people together as disciples, calling them to drop what they are doing and follow him, his next stop is the tax man! Now, none of us particularly like paying taxes, but in the main we understand why we have to and how the money is used to run the country. Tax collectors in Jesus' time were different. They were people from the Jewish community, working for the Romans, so the money they were taking from the people was going to the very people who were oppressing them. On top of that, the tax collectors were often extorting money out of the people but charging them more than what the Romans were asking for, and pocketing the rest for themselves.

Because of his choices, and the way his actions were perceived by the religious leaders, Levi would have been considered to be a traitor. He would have been labelled a 'sinner'.

He most likely was in no way welcome at the temple, had he wanted to go to worship, because as a 'sinner' he was declared to be 'unclean'. He was trapped by his own sin and greed, and Jesus offers him another way.

Jesus calls Levi to follow him, he gets up, leaves his booth behind, and follows Jesus.

Sometimes that's the way it has to be when we encounter Jesus. Once we have heard his message, and responded to his call, there may be things we have to walk right away from.

It might mean, like Levi, things have to be left behind that made us very well off. The path that Jesus leads us on is narrow, not wide. Jesus calls us, not us and all our luggage.

From the start, the people Jesus chooses as his disciples are not really the kind of people that everybody expected. His ministry was growing, people were becoming very interested in his teaching. There would have been a lot of people desperate to be one of Jesus' disciples, perhaps even with offers of money for the privilege.

But no, Jesus goes directly to the fishermen and the tax collectors and says "You're the ones! Come on, guys, let's go. I've got a lot to teach you and we don't have a lot of time, so let's get going!"

What are the chances that these disciples didn't even get along particularly well at first? Levi was a hated man! But Jesus brings these people into the heart of his ministry, to let them knock against each other in the midst of his teaching. Through the people Jesus chose, he made a clear statement that he was available to everybody. Where the religious leaders considered certain people to be unclean and untouchable, Jesus welcomed them, gave them value, and taught them important lessons on how we are all to live.

While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the "sinners" and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: "Why does he eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?"

Jesus can't even have a quiet meal without being spied on and criticised!

Levi has been called by Jesus to follow him, and he gets the chance to try out his new-found generosity by putting on a meal for Jesus and his disciples. The problem is, the Pharisees see this as a bad thing.

The Pharisees had a very special gift, which was the ability to take God's law and then construct extra laws around it to make sure they didn't do anything wrong. So what was happening was the laws that were constructed by people were being treated with the same gravity as God's original law.

They were very particular about hand washing, and if their methods of hand washing were not being followed, then they would declare the offenders to be unclean and unfit for worship.

We know nothing of the conversation during this meal. Perhaps Jesus didn't even give any specific teaching. Perhaps they all simply enjoyed a meal together in each other's company! The Pharisees really couldn't deal with this.

When the Pharisees said “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?” they may just as easily have said “Why doesn't he eat with US? We're the ones who are doing it all the right way. We're the ones who stay as holy as possible. Look at all the extra laws we constructed for that very purpose! Why doesn't he eat with US?”

They could see how much of a following he was getting, and that he would be a very significant ally. If they couldn't get him on their team, they would have to set about undermining him instead. It really wouldn't do to have someone teaching in God's name and keeping the company of sinners and unclean people.

What does that look like for us today? Who would you least like to be seen in the company of? Are there certain people who you would consider 'inappropriate company'? It didn't matter to Jesus – all he saw was people in need of some love and care.

On hearing this, Jesus said to them, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”

Right away, Jesus responds to the Pharisees and points out that he fully intends to make himself available to those who need him, and the people who need him the most are the sinners. He doesn't actually disagree with the Pharisees on their point that the people he is with are sinners – but at the same time he doesn't excuse sin, or trivialise it.

Indirectly, Jesus is actually including the Pharisees in his statement. The sin of the Pharisees is that they have made their religion their god, instead of making God their god.

“It's not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.” What would be the point of a doctor who only saw healthy people? There would be no evidence of that doctor's skills and abilities. There would be no sign of the doctor doing anything to help and improve the lives of others. If you saw a doctor who had sick people gathering all around him, you would most likely think that they must be pretty good at what they do, because everybody's going to them for help.

The rules and extra laws that the Pharisees had put in place were actually stopping the people who needed God the most from being able to meet with

him. The religious people become more and more self-righteous, and the 'sinners' become more and more detached and beyond help.

Jesus puts an end to that.

Jesus breaks the slavery of religion and legalism.

Jesus breaks the slavery of sin and rebellion.

Jesus makes himself available, he makes it clear that there is nothing we can do that is so bad that he will not forgive us, as long as we accept our failures and respond to his call, which is:

“Follow me.”

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