

Mark 1:14-20

¹⁴ After John had been arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God: ¹⁵ “This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.” ¹⁶ As he passed by the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting their nets into the sea; they were fishermen. ¹⁷ Jesus said to them, “Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men.” ¹⁸ Then they abandoned their nets and followed him. ¹⁹ He walked along a little farther and saw James, the son of Zebedee, and his brother John. They too were in a boat mending their nets. ²⁰ Then he called them. So they left their father Zebedee in the boat along with the hired men and followed him.

Context

Although only 14 verses into the gospel narrative, Mark has already introduced us to John the Baptist and following his baptism, Jesus has already been tempted in the desert (vv.12-13). Then, in a typically abbreviated style, Mark merely refers in passing to the whole story of John’s denunciation of Herod for immorality, and John’s consequent imprisonment and death (for full account, see 6:14–29). The incident serves here only as a date-line, for from this moment began the preaching of the good news by Jesus.

With John’s arrest, Jesus’ work begins. Mark’s “*gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God*” began at v.1; now the “*good news of God*” begins, as Jesus’ first words are heard: “*This is the time of fulfillment*” (v. 15).

Commentary

It is significant that Jesus does not enter upon his own distinctive ministry until after John has been arrested. “*After John had been arrested*” – the Greek word for “arrested” is *paradidomi* – the word that is used for Jesus’ “betrayal” or “handing over” (3:19; 9:31; 10:32; 14:10, 11, 18, 21, 41, 44; 15:1, 10, 15). John is Jesus’ precursor in terms of message -- “repentance;” in terms of “being handed over;” and in terms of death. The arrest of John and the beginning of Jesus’ ministry are intentionally correlated to show that the gospel is proclaimed and known in adversity and suffering, not in ease and comfort.

Mark’s formulation also suggests that Jesus is restrained by God from his ministry of proclamation until the Baptist is removed from the scene. His arrest indicates that the time has come for Jesus to act. Jesus enters into Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God.

The Time of Fulfillment

This phrase is only in Mark. The word for time is *kairos*; it is used in 11:13 and 12:2 to refer to the “time of harvest” – an image that usually refers to the time of judgment. It is also used in 13 when “*The Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory.*” Yet this is something liminal about the moment. There is a part of us that wants an “epiphany” with the kingdom clearly present; there is a triumphalistic part of us that wants the kingdom to conquer all – here and now. Yet the world still seems very much intact. Instead of a kingdom epiphany, the second act opens with Jesus wandering by the sea, bidding some common laborers to accompany him on a mission. Still, here in Mark’s gospel we know when the time is. It is now – and yet we pray “Your kingdom come....” I appreciate Martin Luther’s explanation to the second petition of the Lord’s Prayer. “God’s kingdom comes on its own without our prayer, but we ask in this prayer that it may also come to us.”

The Gospel of God

What is meant by “the gospel of God” is defined by the summary of Jesus’ proclamation in Ch. 1:15; each element clarifies God’s decisive action in sending forth his Son at this particular moment in history. The emphasis upon the fullness of time grounds Jesus’ proclamation securely in the history of revelation and redemption. It focuses attention upon the God who acts, whose past election and redemption of Israel

provided the pledge of his activity in the future. Jesus declares that the critical moment has come: God begins to act in a new and decisive way, bringing his promise of ultimate redemption to the point of fulfillment. By sovereign decision God makes this point in time the critical one in which all the moments of promise and fulfillment in the past find their significance in one awesome moment. In comparison with John's preaching, the distinctive note sounded by Jesus is the emphasis upon. Its exact nuance is clarified by the phrase which follows.

The Kingdom of God

What Jesus meant when he affirmed that the kingdom of God had drawn near is nowhere explicitly defined. The emphasis upon the "kingdom," however, links his proclamation to the self-revelation of God in the OT and stresses the continuity between the new and older revelation. In announcing "the kingdom of God," the accent falls upon God's initiative and action. The kingdom of God is a distinctive component of redemptive history. It belongs to the God who comes and invades history in order to secure man's redemption. The emphasis falls upon God who *is* doing something and who will do something that radically affects men in their alienation and rebellion against himself.

The kingdom may be proclaimed as near, if God's decisive action in its realization has already begun. John's ministry had centered upon the urgent demand for repentance because God was about to act decisively in bringing among the people "the Coming One." Jesus then proclaims that the kingdom has drawn near, and while his proclamation is veiled, Mark clearly understands that it is Jesus' own appearance which is the decisive event in the redemptive plan of God. The coming of the kingdom remains future, but it is certain precisely because God has begun to bring it to pass in the coming of his Son. The announcement that the consummation is at hand affirms that the decisive events in its approach are under way. The Anointed One is already present among the covenant people, and through him the royal act of God in redeeming his people has begun. The kingdom has drawn near, *spatially* in the person of Jesus who embodied the kingdom in a veiled way, *and temporally* because it is the only event which takes place prior to the end. In the person of Jesus men are confronted by the kingdom of God in its nearness. A faithful response to the proclamation of the gospel is imperative.

Repent and Believe

John Williamson, (*Mark*, p.43) offers this analogy which "may capture some (not all) dimensions of this summary of the preaching of Jesus."

In a crowded airline terminal, hundreds of persons are scurrying in dozens of directions. Above the steady buzz of noise a voice booms through a loud-speaker, "Flight 362 is now arriving at gate we. Will passengers holding tickets for New York please check in at gate 23; you will be boarding soon." Some people, of course, never hear the announcement and continue on their way. Others hear it but, having reservations on another flight, pay no attention. Some, however, who want to go to New York and who have been nervously awaiting such an announcement, look up expectantly, check their ticket for the flight number, gather their baggage, turn around and set out with some urgency for gate 23.

Our openness to hear and believe and act on the proclamation is key. Some act; some don't.

The summons to "repent and believe in the gospel" is not new, but a fresh reiteration of the word addressed to men through the prophets. But the note of urgency in the summons to repent is sharpened, for now the nature of the gospel is clearer than ever before. The brief parable of the fig tree preserved by Mark in Ch. 13:28 echoes Jesus' proclamation that the kingdom *has come near* and clarifies why the nearness of the kingdom imposes radical demands upon men: "When the branch becomes tender and the leaves are about to sprout, you know that the summer *has come near*"; i.e., the summer is *the next thing* that comes. Jesus' action in confronting Satan, sin, disease and death, and subduing nature is the sign that the end stands as the next act of God in man's future. Provision has been made for men to repent, but

there is no time for delay. Only through repentance can a man participate with joy in the kingdom when it does break forth. Jesus accordingly calls men to radical decision. In Jesus men are confronted by the word and act of God; he himself is the crucial term by which belief and unbelief come to fruition. Jesus proclaims the kingdom not to give content but to convey a summons. He stands as God's final word of address to man in man's last hour. *Either* a man submits to the summons of God *or* he chooses this world and its riches and honor. The either/or character of this decision is of immense importance and permits of no postponement. That is what repentance is all about. The radicalness of Jesus' kingdom proclamation is well caught in the saying, "He who is near me is near to the fire; he who is far from me is far from the kingdom" (Coptic Gospel of Thomas, Logion 82). Jesus himself, though veiled in the midst of men, becomes the crucial term by which men enter the kingdom of God, or exclude themselves from it. What he does is the work of God.

Certitude or Trust

Douglas John Hall (*Bound and Free: A Theologian's Journey*) writes about the necessity of "our becoming and being a *thinking* faith." I think it relates to these two commands to repent and believe.

There is a problem today that is found not only in Christianity but in most of the religions, as well as in many nonreligious ideologies. I will call this the problem of certitude. Its corrective is the importance of Christianity's being a thinking faith – and, more specifically, the importance of doubt in the life of faith.

The people who attacked the United States on September 11, 2001, were apparently inspired by absolute certainty with respect to their cause. They found that certainty in their religious belief. Their religion functioned for them as an antidote against all self-doubt, all consciousness of the limitations of knowledge, all awareness of the precariousness of human judgment. ... No one religion, and not religion as a whole, has a monopoly on what (for want of a better word) we call fundamentalism. Fundamentalism, whatever the origin of the term, has come to mean a position of such exactness and certitude that those embracing it – or, more accurately, those embraced by it – feel themselves delivered from all the relativities, uncertainties, indefiniteness, and transience of human existence. They are provided, they feel, with a firm foundation – a fundamentum – greater than their own finitude, greater than any observations of any of the sciences, greater than the collective wisdom of the race. (pp. 99-100)

He then states that biblical religion (Jewish and Christian) refuses to offer such certitude. What God offers as an alternative to certitude is trust. "God reveals Godself as one who may be trusted" (101).

Recognizing that the Greek word for "believe" (*pisteuo*) has a principal meaning of trust in it, could we then interpret "repent" (*metanoeo*) = "to change one's thinking" to be a movement away from personal certitude? Which then leads to trusting the trustworthy One?

Fishers of Men

As the first act of the Galilean mission Mark reports the calling of Simon and Andrew to be fishers of men. Jesus found these brothers working as fishermen on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, elsewhere designated the Lake of Gennesaret or the Sea of Tiberias. The inland sea, which was twelve miles in length and six miles across at its widest point, provided a point of access between Galilee and Perea. There were many towns and fishing villages especially on the western and northern shores. The waters teemed with life, and when Jesus summoned the brothers they were casting their nets into the sea.

Jesus' word to Simon and Andrew was remembered for its vividness and urgency: "*Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men.*" The call to come after someone implies discipleship because it is the disciple who breaks all other ties to follow his master as a servant. Yet far more than this was involved in the call to become "fishers of men." To interpret this phrase only as a play on words appropriate to the

situation is to fail to appreciate its biblical background and its relevance to the context, which has focused attention on God's eschatological act in sending Jesus. In the OT prophetic tradition it is God who is the fisher of men (*note: some scholars see these references as marginal*). The passages in which the image is developed are distinctly ominous in tone, stressing the divine judgment (Jer. 16:16; Ezek. 29:4 f.; 38:4; Amos 4:2; Hab. 1:14–17). The fishing metaphor was kept alive at Qumran, and it is striking that it is the judgment aspect of the metaphor which is stressed, as when the "Legitimate Teacher" expresses his awareness of being commissioned to execute God's fishing among his contemporaries. The Teacher continues what God has done, in the company of others who are fishers. It is this understanding which provides the key both to the urgency in Jesus' summons of Simon and Andrew and to the radical obedience they displayed in responding to his call. The summons to be fishers of men is a call to the eschatological task of gathering men in view of the forthcoming judgment of God. It extends the demand for repentance in Jesus' preaching. Precisely because Jesus has come fishing becomes necessary. Between v.15 and v.17 there is a most intimate connection; fishing is the evidence of the fulfillment which Jesus proclaimed, the corollary of the in-breaking kingdom.

Yet there is also the immediate human dimension. Two things are of note:

1. Jesus did not ask for repentance and belief – he asked them to leave their nets and follow.
2. It should be noted that although the disciples respond to the call here, they do not fully take up the tasks entailed for some time. They must first be "made" fishers of human beings – shaped and molded and trained in the requisite skills.

In other words, repentance and belief are part of the formation of Christian life that begin by laying down other priorities and tasks and following Jesus to be "made" into one who has repented and who now believes.

The immediate function of those called to be fishers of men is to accompany Jesus as witnesses to the proclamation of the nearness of the kingdom and the necessity for men to turn to God through radical repentance. Their ultimate function will be to confront men with God's decisive action, which to faith has the character of salvation, but to unbelief has the character of judgment. In specifically calling Simon and Andrew to be fishers, there is reflection upon the unpreparedness of the people for the critical moment which has come. In time the fishers will go where Jesus has not gone and they themselves will proclaim the message by which men are gathered. At this point, however, it is the eschatological urgency in Jesus' mission which is expressed in the sudden call, and the immediate response of the fishermen who abandon their nets to follow Jesus.

On this same occasion Jesus saw the sons of Zebedee, James and John, in their boat preparing the nets for another night's fishing. The terms in which they were called are not explicitly stated, but the intimate relationship of these two incidents indicates that they also are summoned to be fishers of men. The stress in Mark's brief report falls upon the sovereign authority in Jesus' call, and the radical obedience of James and John. So compelling is the claim of Jesus upon them that all prior claims lose their validity. Their father, the hired servants, the boat and the nets are left behind as they commit themselves in an exclusive sense to follow Jesus. The urgency in Jesus' call and the radical obedience of the fishermen pose the question, "Who, then, is this who calls?" The use of the fisher image in proximity to Jesus' proclamation summarized in v.15 provides the answer; it is the eschatological Lord who calls. He summons men by an act of grace to serve as agents of the kingdom drawn near, who shall gather a people for judgment.

These few verses seem to outline the programmatic character in Jesus' total plan. It is a crucial text for the interpretation of the Gospel by virtue of its primary position. It anticipates the call of the Twelve in 3:13–19 and their subsequent mission in 6:7–13, 30, but looks beyond this point to the conclusion of the Gospel. Jesus affirms his relationship to those called in terms of a program for the future: he *will* make them *become* fishers of men. What they will become depends upon their following him. The initial

command to follow Jesus receives a final and dramatic extension in the concluding resurrection story. Mark implies that the promise to be made fishers of men finds its fulfillment in the meeting in Galilee promised in Mark 16:7.

Notes

Mark 1:14 *After John*: an impression of successiveness has been deliberately created by Mark where none existed before; historically John's arrest belongs later. Ch. 6:14 shows conclusively, however, that the activities of Jesus and John were both chronologically and spatially separated. Those who judged that Jesus is John raised from the dead could not have seen the two men working together, or known of Jesus' baptism by John. The public activity which brought Jesus to the attention of the people could only have begun after John had been removed from the scene through his arrest.

Gospel. The word *euangelion* is from repeated in 1:1 and forms a bookend to conclude the introduction.

Mark 1:15 *the time of fulfillment.* This phrase appears only in Mark and makes use of the Greek *kairos* a word that the Church has typically designated as "God's time" as opposed to *kronos* – the time of the world. This phrase renders the idea of an appointed time being fulfilled. In 1:2, Scripture as written by Isaiah is fulfilled; here the appointed and predicted time described by that Scripture is realized. What was written had now come to pass. The conceptual connection forms another bookend between the beginning and the end of the introduction. Owing to this, Jesus' initial proclamation of the nearness of the kingdom seems to speak of a more advanced point of time than that of John who had not yet mentioned the beginning of fulfillment." **kingdom of God.** This is the subject of Jesus' preaching and of the Gospel. It designates the rule of God in which he enacts his redeeming power and presence as he had promised (*basileia*). In Jesus, this reality has drawn so near as to be in the process of coming to pass (*engizō*). **repent.** Jesus does not merely repeat the call of the Baptist. He modifies and transcends it by making conversion a fundamental requirement which necessarily follows from the present reality of the *basileia* (kingdom of God) in His own person. **believe in the Gospel:** This is the only instance in Mark where *pisteuo en*, "believe in", is used. Many believe that 'put one's trust in' seems a better translation than 'believe in' [EDNT 3:191].

A bit more on the "kingdom of God": The primary meaning of the Aramaic term used by Jesus is not properly "kingdom" but "sovereign authority." Whenever the biblical texts speak of God becoming king the Targumim speak of God's exercise of sovereign authority, and render the Hebrew verb by an Aramaic noun. e.g.:

Ex. 15:18 "The Lord *shall reign* forever and ever."
Targ. Onkelos "The *sovereignty* of the Lord endures forever and ever."

Isa. 40:10 "Behold, the Lord will come as a mighty man, and his arm *will rule* for him."
Targum "The *sovereignty* of your God will be revealed."

Particularly this second example illustrates the interpretation of the Targum: for the Lord to come as a mighty man and for his arm to rule for him signifies the revelation of God's sovereignty through a saving action. This indicates well the *dynamic* character in the concept of the kingdom: God is he who comes and exercises his sovereign authority in the redemption of all people.

Mark 1:16 *Simon and his brother Andrew*: In Mark 3:16 the evangelist refers to "Simon whom he surnamed Peter." Thereafter Peter is the dominant name (eighteen times) for this disciple with only one reference to "Simon" thereafter (14:37; prior to 3:16 also in 1:16, 29, 30, 36). The following general picture of Peter emerges in Mark's gospel: Simon and his brother Andrew were fishermen on the Sea of Galilee where Jesus called them as his first disciples to follow him and become fishers of men (1:16–18). At the house of Simon and Andrew in Capernaum, Jesus healed Simon's mother-in-law (1:29–31). Following additional healings in Capernaum, Simon, together with others, report to Jesus that people were seeking him (1:35–38). Of the Twelve appointed by Jesus the first of these in the list of their names is Simon "whom he surnamed Peter" (3:14–16). When Jesus revived the ruler's daughter he permitted only

Peter, James, and John to follow him. This is the first of three traditional scenes (cf. 9:2–13 and 13:3–8) involving an “inner group” of three disciples (but in 13:3–8 Andrew is also included in this group) among the Twelve (5:37). Peter’s confession on the way to Caesarea Philippi that Jesus is the “Messiah” and Jesus’ subsequent rebuke of Peter referring to him as “Satan” (8:27–33). The transfiguration of Jesus before Peter, James, and John. Peter “did not know what to say” and offered to make 3 booths for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah (9:2–13). Peter, somewhat perplexed, responds to Jesus, “Lo, we have left everything and followed you,” to which Jesus responds with a word of promise concerning this life and the age to come (10:28–30). As Peter and the others pass by the fig tree which Jesus had cursed on the previous day (11:12–14) he remarks, “Master, look! The fig tree which you cursed has withered” (11:21). Peter, James, John, and Andrew ask Jesus privately when the temple buildings would be destroyed, a question which gives occasion to Jesus’ apocalyptic discourse (13:3–8). Despite Peter’s assertions to the contrary, Jesus predicted that Peter would deny him three times that very night (14:27–31). At Gethsemane, Jesus took Peter, James, and John and shared with them his great distress. Asking them to remain and watch, he went further to pray. Upon his return he found them sleeping and said to Peter, “Simon, are you asleep? Could you not watch one hour?” Twice again Jesus leaves only to return to a similar situation (14:32–42). Following Jesus’ arrest, Peter followed him at a distance into the courtyard of the high priest. Having denied Jesus three times prior to the cock crowing a second time, Peter remembered Jesus’ prediction and broke down and wept (14:54–72). A young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side of the tomb where Jesus had been laid, announces to the women who had come to anoint him, “But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you” (16:7) [AYBD 5:255].

Mark 1:16 casting: Mark employs the technical term for the throwing out of the circular casting net, which had a diameter varying from ten to fifteen feet. The outer edge was weighted to allow the net to sink rapidly, imprisoning fish under it; in the middle of the net was a rope by means of which it could be pulled up. With such a net, usually only a few fish were taken with each cast.

Mark 1:17 fishers of men. This expression is also without solid precedent in the OT, inasmuch as similar examples are negative and point to being caught in *judgment* (Jer 16:16; Ezek 29:4–5; Amos 4:2; Hab 1:14–17). The sense here is positive since, contextually, people are being caught for the Kingdom. Perhaps the need to catch involves a need to rescue, with its underlying assumption that those who are not caught will be judged or that once the fish is caught his old life will be changed forever. While the canonical tradition nowhere identifies Jesus as the Fisher of men, the Coptic Gospel of Thomas, Logion 8, appears to do so: “And he said: The Man is like a wise fisherman who cast his net into the sea, he drew it up from the sea full of small fish; among them he found a large (and) good fish; that wise fisherman, he threw all the small fish down into the sea; he chose the large fish without regret.”

Mark 1:18 followed him. Greek *akoloutheō* This key verb referring to discipleship is an important term in Mark (Mark 1:18; 2:14–15; 8:34; 10:21, 28; 15:41). With one exception (Rev 14:4), the use of this term to refer to discipleship is limited to the Gospels. “Following” involves a commitment that makes all other ties secondary, which is why Jesus’ followers often left other things behind (1:18, 20; 2:14; 10:21, 28; cf. Matt 8:22; Luke 9:61–62). Although Jesus’ disciples are often compared to rabbinical students, this term is never used of a rabbi’s student, so the expression with this nuance appears to be of Christian origin. Here is radical discipleship. Jesus is put first, so family and vocation become secondary.

Mark 1:19 James, the son of Zebedee, and his brother John: Among the first of the twelve disciples called by Jesus were James and his younger brother John, “the sons of Zebedee” (by which expression they are sometimes referred to without the mention of their specific names, as in Matt 20:20; 26:37; 27:56; John 21:2). According to Matt 27:56, the third of the three women watching the crucifixion at a distance was “the mother of the sons of Zebedee.” Matthew’s source (Mark 15:40) refers to this third woman as Salome. If, as seems probable, Matthew is identifying Salome for his readers, rather than

substituting another woman, then the wife of Zebedee and the mother of James and John was Salome. The further speculation that this Salome was a sister of Mary, the mother of Jesus, and that therefore James and John were cousins of Jesus, rests on a very precarious identification of the unnamed “sister of his mother” among those standing beside the cross, mentioned in John 19:25 (cf. the reference to “many other women” at the crucifixion in Mark 15:41) [AYBD 3:617].

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