

Epiphany 3 and Australia Day Dean Susanna

Mark 1.14-20

How fortunate are we to live in this land, the great south land of the Holy Spirit, Australia?. Here at this time we are safe, we are well, we are hopeful. We, the later comers have done well here. Perhaps not so well, the dispossessed first nations peoples, though they too are taking back control of their lives and are an inspiration to me. I think of Stan Grant, of Kathy Freeman, Brooke Prentis, Aunty Kath in Central Australia, and Anglican Priests especially of Kathy Dalton and Aunty Phyllis; and Nicki Moffatt, and many others here in Gippsland.

At this time we have much to celebrate, though we have been through tough times. And we who are here today, have our belonging deeper than race or nation, we belong to God. We follow Jesus and it is from that standpoint that we contribute to our society.

Our readings today remind us of that invitation, that calling from God to follow Jesus. The personal and the political go side by side. 'The Sea of Galilee is the ecological and social setting of the first half of the gospel of Mark. A large freshwater lake about seven miles wide and 13 miles long, its shore is dotted with villages connected with the local fishing industry, the most prosperous segment of Galilee's economy. The lake (also called Sea of Genneseret, Lake Kinneret or Lake Tiberius) is fed by the Jordan River, which flows in from the north and out to the south. Some 209 meters below sea level, it is the lowest freshwater lake on Earth. Due to this low-lying position in a rift valley, the sea is prone to sudden violent storms, as attested in the gospel stories.'¹

K.C. Hanson offers a compelling portrait of the political economy of the fishing industry around the Sea of Galilee during this period, which provides detail of the matrix of oppression narrated in Mark. We know that at this time the fishing industry was being steadily restructured for export, so that the majority of fish were salt preserved or made into a fish sauce and shipped to distant markets throughout the empire. All fishing had become state-regulated for

¹ <https://radicaldiscipleship.net/2015/01/22/lets-catch-some-big-fish-jesus-call-to-discipleship-in-a-world-of-injustice/>

the benefit of the urban elite—either Greeks or Romans who had settled in Palestine following military conquest or Jews connected with the Herodian family. They profited from the fishing industry in two ways. First, they controlled the sale of fishing leases, without which locals could not fish. These rights, and often capitalization as well, were normally awarded not to individuals, but to local kinship-based “cooperatives” (Gk *koinōnoi*)—such as the brothers Simon and Andrew or the Zebedee family we meet in Mk 1:16-20. Second, they taxed the fish product and its processing, and levied tolls on product transport. Local administrators handled royal leases, contracts and taxes—such as “Levi son of Alphaeus,” whom we meet in Mk 2:14.

With such rigid state control of their livelihood and the oppressive economics of export, it is hardly surprising that in Mark’s story fishermen are the first converts to Jesus’ message about an alternative social vision!

Restless peasant fishermen had little to lose and everything to gain, by overturning the status quo. Thus Jesus’ strategic decision was not unlike Gandhi’s attempts to mobilize the “untouchable” classes in India in campaigns such as his famous Salt March.

“And Jesus said to them, ‘Follow me and I will make you fish for people’” (Mk 1:17b). This famous phrase is beloved to evangelicals, who have traditionally interpreted it to connote the vocation of “saving souls.” But we miss the point if we remove this text from its social matrix, and if we ignore the roots of this metaphor in the Hebrew Bible, where it appears in no less than four prophetic oracles...

Jesus—who knew the prophetic literature *and* sought to embody it anew in his context—was using an idiom that “exposed and provoked” the conflict in order to address it. It mixed both the prophetic sense of warning to the oppressor classes and the lament of those oppressed by the privatizers of the Sea of Galilee’s commonwealth. He was summoning these marginalized workers to join him in, to use modern parlance, “catching some Big Fish” and restoring God’s justice for the poor.

Little wonder, then, that Mark records the response of these exploited fishermen to Jesus’ “good news” as immediate (a scenario he repeats twice, 1:18,20). They had little to lose. In

antiquity, leaving the workplace would have entailed both loss of economic security and a rupture in the social fabric of the extended family as well. In that sense, to join this movement demanded not just an assent of the heart, but an uncompromising break with “business as usual.”

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Jesus is calling these disaffected workers out of an exploitive system and back to a network of “kinship” that practices mutual aid and cooperation.

The revered image of “fishing for people,” then, should be understood more in the sense of Dr. King’s struggle “for the soul of a nation” than in terms of Billy Graham’s altar calls. But as the story makes clear, we can be assured that Jesus’ summons to discipleship was both profoundly political *and* personal—then and now.²

There was something remarkably compelling about Jesus to cause these and others to follow him into an uncertain future though. The astonishing feature of the story is that they followed Jesus with no idea of where it would lead.

As far as we know, every one of the disciples was chosen and called by Jesus. We believe that God calls each one of us. God not only calls us to follow Jesus, but also calls us into the fields and careers of our lives.

God calls everybody. The word for this call to everyone is “vocation,” from Latin *vocatio*, “calling.” Everyone has a place in how society functions, and this “vocation.” Every job that works to build up and maintain society is a calling — teacher, insurance salesman, car mechanic, farmer, politician, etc. We also have callings within family structures — mother, father, aunt, uncle, child, etc. We serve God in these family callings as well.³ No calling is higher or greater than any other. We need to be true, to be authentic, to listen and to respond.

‘The Old Testament lesson from the book of Jonah is also a story about “calling,” but with ironic twists. Jonah is called to proclaim a

² <https://radicaldiscipleship.net/2015/01/22/lets-catch-some-big-fish-jesus-call-to-discipleship-in-a-world-of-injustice/>

³ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-after-epiphany-2/commentary-on-mark-114-20-3>

message to people he doesn't like — a message he hopes will not be accepted. After trying unsuccessfully to avoid his calling, he finally arrives in Nineveh and delivers the shortest sermon in the Bible, an eight-word threat of destruction. To his dismay the sermon is effective. The book of Jonah ends as God makes clear to Jonah that mercy is for everyone who repents.

Jonah's call included the message he was to deliver, but in today's gospel the four fishermen are called with no further instructions whatsoever. They are called to a totally uncertain future and would surely have been scared out of their wits had they known what lay in store for them.

God's call is always into an uncertain future, and adventure or change and chance. When we enter into our callings we have no idea how it will all end up. We choose our careers and jobs hoping that we can use the gifts and talents God has given us, but there are no guarantees.⁴

In "The Quest of the Historical Jesus," Albert Schweitzer – writes, 'He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lake-side, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: "Follow thou me!" and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfil for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is'.⁵

Jan Richardson ponders:

'It's challenging at times to reconcile the seeming paradox that giving ourselves to a God of love and mercy does not always protect us from heartache and suffering; in fact, it sometimes does just the opposite. Called to engage the world, we find ourselves drawn more deeply into the pain and despair present there—along with (thank God) the delight. In each place Christ calls us to notice and to

⁴ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-after-epiphany-2/commentary-on-mark-114-20-3>

⁵ <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/01/epiphany-3-b-following-jesus-today/>

embody the presence and love of God: to be the living body of Christ, who spoke of his own self as food, as sustenance.

As Merton recognized, it can leave us feeling like we're on the meat hook of God, the way that God claims and hungers for our deepest selves and sends us into the world to be Christ's body, to offer his sustenance. Given what a consuming, demanding, and sometimes perilous prospect it can be to share fully in the life of Christ, one might well wonder: what compels us to follow him?

What lures you to Christ? What is it about him that beckons you, calls to you, compels you not only to follow him but also to reach out in invitation to others? What is it about Jesus that hooks you?

In a culture that too often tries to scare and threaten us into a relationship with Christ, may we see clearly who he is and embody his fierce and sustaining love in a desperately hungry world'.⁶

Written by Brooke Prentis, Common Ground

May the God of truth

– open our ears and eyes to the wind whistling through the Grasstrees.

May the God of justice

– open our minds to the flowing actions of the waters from refreshing rain, to gentle brook, from mighty river, to raging sea.

May the God of love

– open our hearts to the beat of the Clapsticks calling us in to rhythm.

Now go. . . to pursue Jesus, with truth, justice, and love.

Amen.

Susanna Pain

⁶ <https://paintedprayerbook.com/2009/01/24/hooked/>