

Follow me and go into the world...
Sermon on Mark 1 v16-20 & 6 v53-56 & 16 v15

In my life, sisters and brothers, I often had great friends who helped me a lot...

And I remember that often I said this sentence: “Thanks so much, you saved my life...” And the really wise ones among my friends then responded: “Don’t thank me, you did it yourself... But I am glad if I could help you with it.”

And they were right. They showed me the way, they opened perspectives to me which I did not see alone, they accompanied me on part of my path, they were there when times got really rough, but they were right: the walking down the road, the living my daily life, making decisions, standing up for things and speaking out I did myself – supported by the most awesome women and men who crossed my paths at very different times of my life...

And here is this sentence again. “you saved me...” It leads me to thinking about Jesus, the friendship with him, and the friendships he brings into our lives...

The older I get, the more important it seems to be to me to engage with Jesus, to get orientation from his way of living and loving, to ask what he would do.

Being a follower of Jesus is not only a faith tradition into which I was born, and in which I have grown up. Following Jesus is a way of life.

And the more uncomfortable the political situation in our world becomes, the more I – we – need fellow travellers on our walk with Jesus.

Challenges I have on a daily basis, disagreements with current political leadership, thinking ahead for me and my community, holding fast to visions and the value of the Kingdom of God cannot be done alone.

Worshipping and serving the wrong God has done tremendous damage to people and the earth through the history of humankind. And finding the right way of serving Jesus is a life-long challenge.

In the history of Christianity many have suffered and died because people worshipped a God of power and might who sanctioned slavery, violence, oppression, exclusion, wars and killings... This can never be the God to shape our lives.

Jesus was familiar with such mistakes in history. His concern was serving the true God, a God of life rather than a god of death. In this mission he found many friends among his contemporaries. But there was also conflict and trouble with those who represented the interests of the empire and its gods.

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The story of Jesus told in the gospels is one of emotions flying high on all sides, and Jesus shows that being on the side of the God of life is worth a good confrontation.

Such life is never boring, but life-giving and providing happier lives for those who usually live on the dark side of life – then and now. Matters of life and death – in Jesus’ time and today...

Let us become more pronounced than ever...

Let us search for a counter-culture, an alternative to the systems and societies we are living in.

Sometimes, I think we forget that being saved by Jesus, to follow Jesus, means that you have others around to save you on a daily basis. To remind you of who you are and who you are called to be. To see you and appreciate you and celebrate you. To tell you how far you have come and where God still needs you to go. To come alongside you so that you realize you are not alone.

Two weeks ago we looked at the deepest origins we have as Christians when we studied the texts of the Gospel of Mark which the lectionary holds in store for us this summer.

The early Christians, for whom Mark wrote his gospel, were totally Christ-centered.

The way of Jesus was “their way”.

The spirit of Jesus, the spirit of God, infused people’s spirits and took over.

The Jesus movement focussed entirely on Jesus, eliminated poverty and hunger and integrated people at all levels of society... They shared. They learned how to become more than a bunch of individual, self-interested people. They found themselves becoming a counter-cultural community where all belonged, where nobody was alone, and all had equal standing.

When the evangelist Mark let’s Jesus call his first disciples, notice what’s absent - no individualism,

no being left on your own,

no pulling yourself up by your bootstraps.

No, “you can handle this, do it alone, you can master it.”

No, “follow me and good luck with that.”

Rather, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.”

That is, follow me and more followers are to come.

Follow me and you will never be by yourself.

Notice - Jesus calls them together, not separately.

Andrew and Simon.

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Then James and John.

Discipleship is not a lone profession, it is life lived together, it is cooperation, and it sets new values of community and friendship.

God knows, Jesus knows, we cannot do discipleship on our own.

We cannot do life on our own.

We cannot follow Jesus on our own.

We cannot trust and obey on our own.

We need each other.

We need role models, supporters, people who protect us and hold us.

People who believe in us – maybe sometimes more than we do ourselves.

We need peers and colleagues.

We need friends and neighbours.

We need community and companionship.

We need others to take risks, knowing that we will take the next ones, and vice versa.

We are living in crazy times – here and everywhere.

We observe a dangerous crisis of moral and political leadership wherever we look. We see powerful and mighty men playing with the rest of the world.

And we search for ways of standing up and protesting in the name of Jesus, and in the name of a God who loves the whole world without any exceptions.

Do you remember the women who wore black when the Oscars were awarded, to protest against sexual abuse?

The MeToo movement?

And the ChurchToo movement?

We need not only see these movements but become part of them and similar protest movements. We need to help make sure that people's stories of abuse, oppression and discrimination are heard and seen.

We need to enable each other to name the people and systems who work and stand against the gospel and the way of Jesus.

We need to be brave and clear and wise.

And therefore we need each other.

That is what I hear in the story of Jesus calling the disciples and sending them out... in twos...

We need this. Today. More than ever.

I don't know about you, but it's easy to feel alone these days.

Trying to live according to the truth of the Gospel when the Gospel has been misrepresented and misinterpreted and misused so often...

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Trying to believe in the world wide rule of the Kingdom of God when refugees drown in the Mediterranean and those who try to help are criminalized, when refugee families are torn apart at the American border, kids taken away from their parents and kept in children's homes far away, while their parents are imprisoned...

Trying to preach the love of God when leaders sow hate and disrespect among the different classes in societies and among different countries and races...

Trying to see that fishing for people is not for the individual to avoid condemnation but for the sake of working together all over this earth to make God's dream come true. God's dream of laughter, joy and peace, of justice and goodness and compassion and love and caring and sharing... God's dream of swords being turned into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks... God's dream of one big human family, where all belong and have an equal share...

I ache for companionship in this whole "being a Christian thing".

I long for fellow believers with whom to talk about the Gospel texts, the Jesus stories, and the consequences they may have for our lives and actions.

I long for sisters and brothers with whom to question in what ways the texts are used to uphold power and might, and find ways to use them to lift up the poor and feed the hungry...

I am grateful for this church and its people, for the openness we must practice otherwise we would not exist. I love it that belonging to this international miracle of God keeps me accountable to the Bible text in front of me with all its challenges to stretch beyond what is comfortable, nice and easy.

And I am so grateful for this task to try and understand and interpret the Bible texts so they can become relevant for real people in real situations of fear, doubt and disbelief.

And so, "Follow me," is much more than mere following...

It's believing that you follow a God dedicated to discipleship that depends on dependability.

It's believing that you follow a God who cannot NOT invest in a relationship with you and show you how to nurture, encourage, and empower your relationship with others.

It's believing that our God, who calls us to be his partners, provides so very many to accompany us in all this.

Do you see them?

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Who are your Andrews and Simons?

Your Mary Magdalenes, and the Marys, the mothers of James, and Salomes?

Follow me, says Jesus.

And we can.

Because we are together in this following, or “being a Christian thing”.

That is the message of our first gospel text today, and we need it to understand the next.

A lot happened in Mark’s chapter 6 before they cross over the lake a second time.

Jesus is rejected in his hometown.

He sends the twelve on mission.

John the Baptist is killed.

Jesus feeds the five thousand and walks on water.

These are all major events in Mark’s narrative, so much so that the passage appointed for today seems quite small.

Jesus heals many people in the end, and Mark talks not about individual places or people but about a whole region.

It is important to Mark that the kingdom of God spreads everywhere, and has no boundaries. ...that people learn about the new way Jesus brings and about the changes which must happen once people begin to follow.

And then comes this little passage about the healings...

It seems a bit pale against all the other big things, but it is not – that is what I discovered after a closer look...

These healings which Jesus performs after the second sea crossing in today's text point to how the kingdom of God is setting the world upside down.

When Jesus and his apostles land, the people, as noted above, rush about "the whole region," bringing the sick to wherever Jesus is. "

And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, ... and all who touched - the fringe of Jesus' cloak - were healed" (Mark 6:56).

The Jesus movement, now known by a vast number of people, is from this point on able to take its mission into cities. The mention of towns, cities, and farms means that the Jesus movement now has a healing influence on every social space in Galilee.

The Jesus movement is expanding: Jesus is "coming in" – into towns, cities, and fields. Everywhere, if you like...

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The Greek word translated with "marketplace," refers to a public space in which legal hearings, elections, and debates took place, in addition to the buying and selling of goods. Such marketplaces were the political and commercial centres of the towns.

By healing the sick, the weakest and most vulnerable members of a community, in this space, Jesus is claiming the public space of the mighty for the dealing with, and healing of, the poor and lowly.

And they are healed by someone new, by something new, not by the established and well known.

Healing comes from the bottom of society, from the ordinary people, the carpenter and the fishermen...

This is stuff for a reformation and revolution of everything...

Then and now: healing comes from the bottom of society, from the ideas and visions of the ordinary people – people like you and me.

While the marketplaces of the world belong to the rich and powerful, in the kingdom of God these most political and commercial of spaces are occupied by those with the least.

If we seek to live God's kingdom here and now we must follow Jesus' subversion of worldly power and wealth.

This is Mark's message.

And we may hear God say – at the end of the Gospel of Mark:

“Go into the whole world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation”. (Mark 16 v15)

If I was alone, this would make me really anxious.

It sounds a bit as if we are asked to do the impossible.

But then see what Jesus told the disciples next:

“And remember, I am with you always.”

And: our friends are with us too.

We are many – in the whole world.

“I am with you, and I send you out – not alone...” means: do not fear.

God is with you.

And because you are part of something greater than yourselves, you will be able to do more than you ever could do on your own.

You might even be able to do the impossible.

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As Christians we can live our lives in the greater context of God and God's constant presence. Things then not only become doable, they become transformed.

Jesus understood this.

And that is why he was able to summon the first disciples to do something of which they thought they were utterly and thoroughly incapable.

People who have struggled against life's odds learn this wisdom quickly.

If we live only in the context of the way things are, we are condemned to live according to the dictates of the status quo.

But if we live in the context of that which is greater than ourselves, we become open to the possibility of action and transformation.

I so want to live and act that my whole being proclaims that I am, we are, part of something greater than ourselves...

So let Jesus send us out on a mission that seems impossible.

Let us set signs against what is ruling the world right now, with our very lives.

And let us believe that the power of an amazing grace

and the power of a most loving spirit

will help us to walk and live Jesus' way.

I believe that the mission Jesus gave the disciples then is still our mission now.

And believing this excites me,

scares me,

and gives me strength.

“Go into the world and proclaim the good news...!”

Amen.