Pastoral Letter January 2021

Matthew 1:14-20

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near, repent, and believe in the good news.”

As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.

In my recent travels, I had the privilege of sharing the Gospel with a small group of people. At the conclusion of the reading, one of them stated, “I disagree with most of that.” I respect the fact that there are individuals who disagree with the good news of Jesus Christ. I just respectfully disagree with them.

The truth is that it is important to “dig deep” into a biblical passage. It is important to understand its context, historical significance, and capture a glimpse of the characters in the story before making a judgement.

Theologian Lee Barrett points out that “Jesus’ message and Jesus the messenger mutually re-enforce and define each other. The message, the delivery of the message, and the messenger merge into one phenomenon.”

In this passage we discover that Jesus is more than an extraordinary teacher, spiritual mentor, or social justice activist. We see that Jesus is the living transformative power of God.

Some people look at the disciples and say that they lacked education, experience, wisdom, or even financial stability. And all of that may have been true but they were still chosen by Jesus Christ for a divine plan. Could it be that you and I, despite all of our mistakes, are slowly being transformed into followers of Christ? It is possible that you will be called into a public expression of your salvation? Furthermore, you may even experience a vocation call. It is hard to leave behind all the comforts of home, including self-interest, social approval, and security.

The good news is that God’s grace will allow you to be a reflection of Jesus’ activity. Jesus’ words of ‘follow me’ may well echo in your ears this week.

Today’s gospel is Mark’s account of the beginning of Jesus’ Galilean ministry. He is calling disciples. He is building a community. In the calling of the disciples he is declaring God’s victory and announcing a new way of being. It is the beginning of a new kind of rest, reflection, restoration and reconciliation.

I know a well-respected bishop who concludes each day by asking God to forgive him for the mistakes he has made that day. And then he asks our Lord to help him repair relationships and finally to share the good news of the kingdom. Yes, it is important to repent and believe and start afresh with new loyalties, the first being to a God who is revealing the kingdom. Indeed, a God that is at work in your life.

It appears that Jesus is acting alone in the gospel. It is a reminder that when our Lord speaks, action occurs. As Carl Barth states, “in the obedient responses of the two sets of brothers the reign of God is actualized in the present.”

Rudolph Bultmann says, “wherever Jesus was active, the time was fulfilled and the kingdom was present.”

Today, whenever you hear God’s word spoken, or the preacher unpack the meaning and purpose of the passage in a homily, you can be sure that God’s kingdom is drawing nearer as you are listening.

Some may ask, “is there more to this kingdom than we see right now? What does it look like?” A few theologians have said, “for some it has been as a new situation of unconditional acceptance of sinful humanity. For others it has been seen as a time of unprecedented spiritual vitality displacing an era of stagnation. For yet others it has been seen as a new age of peace and justice, healing the old order of oppression and hostility.”

From a pastoral perspective, this passage has some important insights. The disciples respond “immediately”. It is a fresh start with lots to learn and the possibility of making many mistakes. Lee Barrett states, “becoming a faithful Christian disciple takes both a moment and a lifetime.” Some churches stress the moment of decision but fail to nurture the lifetime commitment. Even lifetime Anglicans need to repeatedly decide on service, sacrifice, and faithfulness. In the midst of our present experience there are days that we need to remind ourselves that we once said, ‘yes’ to the Lord. We cannot revoke but instead must remember ,our call.

I cannot ignore the illustration of fishing. Perhaps this provides further insight into what it is to be a believer throughout one’s entire lifetime. You see…fishing is not always about your net, or line in the water. It is also about preparation, repairing a reel, or trying to get untangled from the rocks below the surface. We too have moments in our faith journey that require preparation, reparation, and restoring of the courage to cast our lines again.

Finally, it is important to state that the experience of John the Baptist teaches us what Elton Brown stated. “…they knew the risks involved with giving yourself over to a new vision that challenges the status quo. To repent, to begin a new life, to be led by the Spirit, takes not just faith but also courage.”

Today I would like to invite you to prepare for our upcoming Vestry meeting on the morning of January 31st at 11 am, by prayerfully inviting God to reveal for you ,what it means when Jesus says, come follow me.

Blessings,

Stephen

The Rev. Dr. Stephen Hendry