

The LCA provides this sermon edited for lay-reading, with thanks to the original author.

Sermon for Epiphany 3B - Sunday 24th January, 2021

The Text: Mark 1:14-20

Grace, Mercy and Peace to you from God our heavenly Father and from our Lord and Saviour, Christ Jesus. Amen.

Salesmen are everywhere. They come to our front door promising more services at a lower cost. They invade our email inbox promising to make us rich. Watching a video on YouTube comes at the price of having to sit through an advertisement. There are even television channels devoted to selling us stuff.

Advertisers don't just sell stuff; they're in the business of selling the consumer an image of the person they could be. The product is the means by which the consumer can be transformed into a new person. From a loser to a winner; from lonely to the life of the party; from sick to healthy; from a skinny wimp to being unbelievably attractive; from rich to poor; from sad to happy.

The idea of purchasing an instant change to our lives is very appealing. But will buying stuff get us what we really need. Earthly things like the latest gadgets, wealth, possessions, lengthy vacations, beauty treatments will all make us happy for a while, then we become bored with them and hunt for the next lift-me-up bargain that comes along.

When Jesus commanded Simon and Andrew, James and John to follow Him, He wasn't promising to make them successful, beautiful or popular. Jesus was not offering to make them into a better version of themselves. His message is clear for all those who seek God, "Repent and believe in the gospel."

Simon, Andrew, James and John left what they were doing and followed Jesus. They gave up their work, left their families and changed the way they lived, all to be disciples of Jesus. This decision didn't last a couple of days or just a few weeks. It involved every part of their lives for the rest of their lives. Only the good news of God's gracious kingdom could bring about such a change.

We shouldn't be surprised at how completely these fishermen left everything to follow Jesus. They were devout knowledgeable Jews. They understood the importance of Jesus' words. Along with many in Israel, they were waiting for God to send the Messiah. They saw Jesus as an answer to the promise of God and the prayers of many. So, they followed Jesus, even if they didn't understand everything that it would mean for them or even if they misunderstood what God's kingdom

would look like. Jesus was offering them a place in God's kingdom, so they had to follow Him.

The people of Nineveh were offered the same gift, and they took hold of God's kingdom with both hands. The call to discipleship was presented to them with much the same briefness as Jesus' message to those first disciples. "Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown" preached Jonah.

Yet it was not the city that was overthrown, but the hearts of the people. God was angry with their sinful ways and He threatened to destroy them, yet He mercifully gave them 40 days to change their ways. In fear of God's judgement, the Ninevites turned to the Lord with sorrowful and repentant hearts. God showed His mercy and they didn't waste the time they had. Seeing their repentant hearts and hearing their prayers, God overturned His decision to destroy Nineveh and He had mercy on them. God always prefers to save the wicked than see them destroyed.

The Law and the Gospel in Jonah's short sermon, as brief as it was, created faith in the hearts of Nineveh's citizens. Everyone, from the greatest of them to the least of them, fasted and called on God to have mercy, and the city was spared.

God's Law and Gospel work together to change sinners, whether it's the fishermen of Galilee, citizens of one of the great cities of the ancient world, or the people sitting in the pew this morning. The Gospel makes disciples of all those who hear and believe in God's promise to forgive and save. Whether the message is heard for the first time or heard again, it creates and sustains faith and keeps all believers walking in the footsteps of Christ and on the path to life everlasting.

Discipleship with Jesus is a journey and we usually begin on that path before we realise it. For most of us discipleship began at the font in Baptism. Before we could speak a word, God washed us clean and made us His own. Jesus says that's how disciples are made (Mt 28:19). God didn't promise in your Baptism to make you into a better version of yourself. He killed the old you, the old Adam, and made you who you are meant to be. You were born again a child of God. You were made a citizen in God's kingdom. In Baptism, the power of sin to kill us in eternity was taken away.

But Jesus isn't interested in just forgiving sins at a certain moment in time, like in Baptism, then leaving us to live life as we please before calling us into heaven at our death. He has so much more planned for His disciples.

Christ has called us to be His disciples, to walk in His footsteps, to learn from Him what it means to be a child of God. He shows us how to love one another, how to pray and worship, how to speak about Him to others. Spending time with Jesus in the Word, we learn from Him how to be His disciples.

God has gifts to give and virtues to grow in us that take a life time to mature. He has fruit He desires to grow in us to use us to expand His kingdom. But our

sinful nature resists the Spirit's work. We're lazy by nature and would rather be doing our own thing, or nothing, or regularly change who we follow. Being a disciple of Jesus does not come natural to us, and we fail often to walk in His ways. God's forgiveness is always needed to take away our laziness, indifference, and idols, and give us a clean conscience.

That is why Jesus says, "Follow me and I will make you become fishers of men." We're a work in progress. Sure, God looks at us and sees His own beloved children, but the flesh is still influencing our thoughts and actions. We are saints who struggle to live holy lives. We become more like Christ each time we come to God as sinners and hear the wonderful news of the forgiveness Jesus purchased for us on the cross.

And so, to hear the Gospel, we come to God's house where Christ grants us the riches of God's kingdom in the Word and in the Sacraments. Through the means of grace God grows us in the image of His Son and grants us greater desire to walk in Christ's footsteps.

Being a fisher for the kingdom of God is as simple as taking that which God has granted you as a free gift and sharing it with others. As God grants you peace, work to live at peace with others. As God forgives you, so you forgive. As you hear the Gospel go and speak about the Jesus who each day renews your life. As Christ's words bring you comfort in your troubles, take His words and speak them to others in their difficulties. As a disciple of Christ, let His love work through you so that others can see and hear Jesus in your words and actions.

That is how you cast the net of the Gospel to increase God's kingdom, by staying close to Christ to receive His grace and grow in confidence to share Jesus with the world.

Simon and Andrew, James and John jumped at the opportunity to follow Jesus. He was offering them God's love, pardon for all sins, eternity itself. Compared to what this world can offer, forgiveness now and heaven forever is far better. And so, we are willing to turn our back on the dead promises and temptations of this world, to follow Jesus offer through this troubled life and onto eternity. He promises to never leave us, to grant us true peace and to forgive every sin. When we look at it that way, how could we turn our back on the deal of a lifetime?

So in conclusion - you don't have to worry about where He will lead you. You know where the journey ends. Sure, along the way it will get rocky, but life is like that anyway, how much more difficult is life without Christ. Is it not better to follow Jesus through the problems of life knowing there is a purpose to your troubles and suffering? Why live life your way when you cannot rescue yourself from death?

Follow Christ, He is your peace, your resurrection and your life. Cling to His message of forgiveness. Keep your eyes fixed on Him who overcame death and walks with you now to lead you on the path of righteousness. Seek Him where He may be found – in His Word, in water, in bread and wine – and come to Him often to receive His forgiveness and grace to keep walking in His footsteps.

The peace of God that passes all human understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.