

## BIBLICAL RESOURCES



**Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Psalm 24 (25); 1 Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20**

## The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near

Mark 1:14 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.”

Mark 1:16 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. 17 And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” 18 And immediately they left their nets and followed him. 19 As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. 20 Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

### INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The Sunday Gospel is in two parts, the first part of which gives the core invitation of Jesus and the second part narrates the call of the first disciples. The alert reader will notice a considerable contrast between this account and the passage from John read last Sunday. The Fourth Gospel offers much more psychologically and humanly believable versions of the call stories in John 1:29-51. In Mark, the human interest dimension is stripped away totally and all the questions we would like to ask (Did they know him before? How did their wives feel?) are excluded. Instead, the writer offers a purely theological reading of the call, which profiles the authority of Jesus and the corresponding obedience of the disciples. The two call stories follow the same structure: he passed, he saw, he called them, they left, they followed. Naturally, behind this theological outline, lies a complex human experience, but one which is not available to us from the texts. The disciples will eventually become part of the Twelve, that symbolic number of the tribes, as a prophetic



gesture to express Jesus’ own understanding of God’s project of the restoration of Israel.

### OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

Looking mainly at the proclamation story, there is a considerable background in the Old Testament to the words used here.

#### *Good News*

The background to this expression lies in Isaiah 52:7-12 and 61:1-4. It refers to a new eschatological (end-time) era of salvation to be established by God. Isaiah uses a verb instead of a noun.

#### *Kingdom of God*

It probably comes as a surprise to the general reader that the full expression “kingdom of God” is found nowhere in the Hebrew Bible (it does occur once in the Wisdom of Solomon 10:10, written in Greek). God as “king” is widely present in the Old Testament, of course, as indeed is the mention of “his kingdom”. The book of Daniel gives a special profile to the future kingdom, which God will inaugurate (Daniel 7 is the key text). From the time of Daniel onwards, many Jews cherished a hope that God would eventually intervene and establish his kingdom of justice and peace. This future vision of God’s justice and peace

### Thought for the day

The journey of life inevitably brings up the question what should I be, who should I become? Is life a maze or a labyrinth? Is it just round and round or is there a way out? How will I be as a spouse, a parent, a partner, a church member? Within the Christian project, do I feel myself called to “activate” my baptism in some particular ministry or contribution? Such discernment will take in the grateful acknowledgement of my gifts as well as an examination of my inner generosity of spirit. In reality, we are all called by the Lord to build up the body of Christ. It is not a question of *if* but rather of *how*.

### Prayer

God of surprises, take me by surprise once more and let me see how my special gifts could be part of your project of the Kingdom in Jesus.

lies behind the proclamation of Jesus.

#### *Repents*

Behind the New Testament word *metanoia* (repentance or better conversion) lies the Old Testament word *shuv*, literally to come back, to return. As a metaphor for a change of heart, it implies turning from sin to righteousness, in a mood of sorrow for immoral behaviour. You can see this in the case of Solomon in 1 Kings 8:46. The word *shuv* is used also for turning away from idolatry to true worship of the Lord, as in Isaiah 1:10-17; Ezekiel 14:6; 18:30 and Amos 4:6-11. God meets this change of heart with forgiveness and restoration.

#### *Calling*

So he set out from there, and found Elisha son of Shaphat, who was ploughing. There were twelve yoke of oxen ahead of him, and he was with the twelfth. Elijah passed by him and threw his mantle over him. He left the oxen, ran after Elijah, and said, “Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you.” Then Elijah said to him, “Go back again; for what have I done to you?” He returned from following him, took the

yoke of oxen, and slaughtered them; using the equipment from the oxen, he boiled their flesh, and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he set out and followed Elijah, and became his servant. (1Kings 19:19–21)

**KIND OF WRITING**

The first passage is a kind of *epitome*, that is, the presentation of the essential features of Jesus’ teaching. The second passage is an anecdote (*chreia*) capturing the “needful”, by word and deed. There are two very similar anecdotes here.

**NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND**

In Mark’s Gospel, the Good News is the motor behind the ministry and proclamation of Jesus (Mark 1:1, 14-15; 10:29; 13:10; 14:9; 16:15, 20). Jesus regularly illustrates this Good News in stories of healings, offers of forgiveness, exorcisms and in general in his inclusion of the excluded, such as tax gatherers, prostitutes and, exceptionally, foreigners. In Mark, Jesus uses a special word for time (*kairos*), meaning not chronological time, but eventful time, the historic offer of God. The word does come back in the Gospel (Mark 1:15; 10:30; 11:13; 12:2; 13:33). Kingdom of God is very regular in this Gospel (Mark 1:15; 4:11, 26, 30; 9:1, 47; 10:14-15, 23-25; 12:34; 14:25; 15:43). The invitation to convert, as such, returns only once in Mark 6:12.

**ST PAUL**

You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors. But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus.

Then after three years I did go up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days; but I did not see any other apostle except James the Lord’s brother. In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie! Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia, and I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea that are in Christ; they only heard it said, “The one who

formerly was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy.” And they glorified God because of me. (Galatians 1:13-24)

**BRIEF COMMENTARY**

**Verse 14** Jesus was a disciple of John and his own ministry started after the arrest of John, when the stage was cleared, so to speak. This is fairly different to what we find in the Gospel of John, in which the ministries of John and Jesus overlap. The word arrested means “handed over”, the term also used for Jesus’ passion (John’s destiny prefigures that of Jesus). Proclaiming is a technical term, meaning *effective* proclamation.

**Verse 15** Jesus declares that the Kingdom God *has drawn near*. Unlike in the other two Synoptic gospels, in Mark Jesus never claims it has arrived in the present. The feeling of end-time carries with it the sense that something of ultimate significance for human history is unfolding. Repent means convert, in the sense of changing the way you look at the world. Believe the good news means to have faith in this God. Far from mere good advice, the good news is meant to be precisely that—*news*. Cf. *“No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak; otherwise, the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins.”* (Mk 2:21–22)

**Verse 16** Unlike in John 1, Simon and his brother are called first. Their job suggests the metaphor of “fishers of men” (using an older translation). The family owns a business and a house, so they are not the poorest of the poor. As usual, Jesus himself takes the initiative—they do not offer themselves as disciples.

**Verse 17** “Follow me” is a command unique to Jesus and can be shown to go back to him historically. In Mark, these are the first words of Jesus *to anyone* and so have special significance. At the time, fishing had connotations different from today. In the Bible, it could refer to catch, in the sense of harvest and so to judgement. In the wider culture, it meant teaching. In neither case is the primary emphasis on getting more people “in.”

**Verse 18** “Immediately” is typical of the breathless style of Mark and also serves to illustrate his theology of call: it invites an unequivocal response, holding

nothing back.

**Verse 19** The second call story is very like the first. There is an echo of the call stories of the prophets, for example Is 6:1-8; 41:9; 42:6. The initiative lies with Jesus. The Greek for call (*kaleō*) is related to the word for assembly or church (*ekklēsia*), the *gathering of the called*.

**Verse 20** Again, an unconditional yes, marked by the abandonment of their livelihood. The information that they had employees suggests that at least these disciples were not at the lowest economic level. The biblical text behind this verse is the story of Elijah calling Elisha, as we saw above.

**POINTERS FOR PRAYER**

1. “The time is fulfilled” – this is a decisive moment in the life of Jesus. His public ministry is about to begin. Recall turning points in your own life when something new happened and with hindsight you can say the time was ripe for it to happen, “the time was fulfilled.”
2. “Repent and believe the good news”. Jesus called for a change of heart, as a response to the good news of the gospel message. A new level of faith in yourself leads to a new way of seeing yourself. A new way of understanding God leads to a conversion in how we relate to God, a change of heart. A growth in awareness of who we are can lead us to a new level of self-confidence, another change of heart. Can you recall times when “good news” led you to a change of heart?

3. The Spirit of God, who was at work in Jesus calling the disciples, continues to work in our day and in our lives. That is why the gospel message is one of *good news*. In the everyday events of our own lives we can see the grace of God at work. When have you had what you would consider a “call experience” that led you to a different style of life? Who was the “Jesus person” through whom the call came to you? To whom have you been a “Jesus person” in this way?

**PRAYER**

Your sovereign rule, O God, draws near to us in the person of Jesus your Son. Your word summons us to faith; your power transforms our lives. Free us to follow in Christ’s footsteps so that neither human loyalty nor earthly attachment may hold us back from answering your call. We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen