

Year B, Epiphany 3, 21st January 2024

Jonah 3: 1-5, 10

1 Corinthians 7: 29-31

Mark 1: 14-20

Have you ever had a meeting with anyone, or indeed God, in a way that has turned your life upside down and sent it in a direction that you could never have imagined?

For most of us the answer I suspect is no. Yes, of course our lives are changed when we become Christians, but for most of us our lives are transformed gradually. In so many aspects of our lives, we think we have got time, time to wait and see, time to procrastinate, time to leave it to someone else fix the mess.

But that's not the case in our Gospel today that Dimitri has just read for us, is it? Simon and Andrew, James, and John, drop everything at Jesus' invitation, give up their livelihoods just like that, almost certainly to the consternation, and possibly anger, of their fathers, who no doubt relied on them to do the heavy work of hauling in the nets, of working at night and so on. How was Zebedee going to earn a living now?

Of course, what we don't know is whether they had met Jesus previously, because after all Galilee was a pretty small place, or whether this was their first encounter. The Gospels are pretty sparse on those sorts of details, but there must have been something incredibly compelling about Jesus if that was their very first conversation.

In the Gospel reading, and indeed in the reading from Jonah set for today, let alone life, as so often it all comes down to timing. Jesus starts his public ministry once he hears that John the Baptist has been arrested by Herod. What happened to John the Baptist eventually happened to Jesus, death at the hands of the authorities. Jesus knew that what he was getting into was dangerous, but suddenly it was no longer a case of well at some point in the future, the time had suddenly become now, right now.

And that was Jonah's message to Nineveh – you have got 40 days before the comfortable world as you know it will be no more unless of course you repent.

As we know they did repent, which annoyed Jonah hugely because God relented, as he had promised, and didn't smite them all down, which is what Jonah not so secretly wanted because the Ninevites were Israel's deadly enemies and oppressors. The Bible is very good at foreshortening time, because it must have taken Jonah a long time to get from where the whale spat him out back to Nineveh, as they were in diametrically opposite places. When he eventually arrived, that was the right time for God's message to be delivered.

And in today's Epistle, Paul has the same message – you need to change now, he tells the Corinthians because the appointed time has grown short.

All those readings have implications for us. Do we believe in our hearts of hearts that our faith makes time-sensitive demands on us? Do we need to acknowledge the urgency of our times and speak out? Do we need to recognise that tolerance can only go so far? By trying to be open-minded are we unwittingly complicit in some of the wrongs in our society. The Post Office scandal has been going on for 20 years and in the public domain for most of that time, but it took ITV to shame the country into dealing with the biggest miscarriage of justice the UK has ever seen.

And there are plenty more issues I could talk about, but invariably we see that that it is the so-called little people who are the victims, and the perpetrators are all too often the institutions and big corporations. Yet we know that God has a bias to the poor and the oppressed, and the Gospel should be good news for them in particular.

And that's what Jesus was inviting the first disciples to do, to share the Good News, an invitation that is extended to us day by day. I'm sure Jesus wouldn't necessarily use the fishing metaphor today. He used it because he was talking to fishermen, and it would have made sense to them. Today, Jesus would use metaphors appropriate to our age.

Jesus may have told those first disciples that he would make them fishers of men, but underlying that was the fact that Jesus was asking Simon, Andrew, James and John, to use the skills and experience they had gained as fishermen to help those they would come in contact with to find the full and abundant life Jesus was offering to those who believed in him.

And that's what we're called to do, to use our life skills, our knowledge, our stories, our backgrounds and then let God bring to fruition what we offer as we share the Good News. Both John the Baptist and Jesus start their public ministry by calling people to repent. And repentance has nothing to do with avoiding hell and damnation. That's a negative way of looking at it, when repentance is actually positive. It's an invitation to change our lives for something better and fuller, for something only God can provide.

That's the Good News.

Note too that those first four disciples didn't make any promises to Jesus when they followed him – and a good thing too because they wouldn't have been able to keep them, any more than we can. No, it was the other way round, it was a promise from Jesus to them, and it still holds good today.

As Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, God not only calls us, but he has also created us as people able to answer that call and follow because he interests us more than anything else in our lives. And if that's the case, we need to embody the vision of the kingdom that God has implanted in us in the particulars of our lives, or to put it another way reflect the beauty of Christ. As the parable of the sower reminds us, our only responsibility is to sow lavishly, recklessly even. But the rest, the germination, the growth, the ripening and so on, is all up to God.

The question for us is not so much whether we're willing to reflect the beauty of Christ in our own lives, important as that is, but whether, particularly in the troubled times in which we live, we share that sense of urgency that impelled those first disciples and are willing to lean into that promise to become fishers of people now.