

Homily 2021.01.24 Third Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)

We now have four Sundays (including today) before Lent begins. And in these Sundays we will finish the first chapter of St Mark's Gospel.

Today we have the first proclamation of the Good News, and the call of the brothers Simon and Andrew, and the brothers James and John. Next Sunday is the first expulsion of an unclean spirit. After that comes the healing of Simon's mother-in-law, many healings and expulsions, Jesus at prayer long before dawn in a lonely place, the beginning of His journey through Galilee, the curing of a leper, and finally Jesus being forced to make camp outside the towns and villages due to his growing fame.

That's a lot to get into chapter one! But that is the character of Mark's Gospel. It's short, snappy, immediate; the shortest of the four Gospels, probably the earliest to be written down. Events that we know well from Matthew and Luke may only get a brief verse or two in Mark. Look up Mark 1:12-13; it's the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness, but there's no dialogue with the devil or any details like that.

Our usual approach to scripture is to take it in bite-sized chunks allowing time to reflect carefully as we go. But there is also value in sitting down and reading an entire gospel at one sitting and appreciating the force and drive of the narrative. Mark is a particularly good gospel for this and now might be a good time to do it. The story rattles along at pace, like any good page-turner. It reaches a high point with Peter's profession of faith in chapter 8 and the Transfiguration in chapter 9, after which it accelerates downhill all the way to Jerusalem and the Passion and Death. And the Resurrection gets the briefest of treatments in the first 8 verses of chapter 16. The remaining verses 9-20, sometimes called 'the long ending' of Mark, are canonically accepted, but are not present in all manuscripts.

The urgency of Mark is seen in the call of the first disciples today: 'at once they left their nets and followed him' and 'He called them at once'.

And it is matched by the urgency in our other readings today. Jonah is called in one word, 'Up!' And St Paul teaches us to live with urgency, because time is short and this world is passing away.

Let's take a slice of this urgency and drive for ourselves and make it part of our lives. When COVID first struck, everything was urgent, our adrenaline levels were high, and we lived off the energy of the moment. Some, most notably our medics, are still living in that way at great personal cost. Our prayer for them must be continuous and urgent. But for many of us, in these winter days, the slow grind of keeping going is wearing us down and the energy and drive is low.

Take a zap like Jonah: 'Up!' Take the hint from St Paul: all things are passing. Hear Jesus proclaim 'The time has come and the kingdom of God is close at hand'. He is calling you now, at once, He is calling me, now, at once. What response will we make, not tomorrow, not in some future plan, but what response will we make here, now, at once?

'Up!' – it is the Lord who speaks