

God of our days and years,
we set this time apart for you.
Form us in the likeness of Christ
so that our lives may glorify you.

Amen.

What God has prepared for those who love him,
he has revealed to us through the Spirit;
for the Spirit searches everything.
Therefore let us in penitence open our hearts to the Lord,
who has prepared good things for those who love him.

Penitence: God of mercy,
we acknowledge that we are all sinners.
We turn from the wrong that we have thought and said and done,
and are mindful of all that we have failed to do.
For the sake of Jesus who died for us,
forgive us for all that is past,
and help us to live each day
in the light of Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Absolution May God our Father forgive us our sins,
and bring us to the fellowship of his table with his saints for ever. **Amen.**

Jonah 3:1-5, 10 [Conversion of Nineveh]

The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, 'Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.' So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, 'Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!' And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

This is the word of the Lord;

Thanks be to God.

Psalm 62:5-12 Wait on God alone in stillness, O my soul, for in him is my hope.

Mark 1:14-20 [The Beginning of the Galilean Ministry]

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 lake—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.

This is the gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

Sermon

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

If you want a precis of today's readings, think of "conversion" and what that means. Or "repentance", perhaps. Because both terms are used in the extract from Jonah, and especially in Mark. So let's take a look. We know that Jesus was from Nazareth, a small, unknown town of barely 2-400 inhabitants. More accurately, it was a

little farming village. The inhabitants lived in caves and in small, primitive one-roomed houses. They were barely subsistence-level farmers.

So as Jesus walked around Galilee and talked to people, he talked to them from life. Many of his parables and stories are agricultural; they're of the natural world of the countryside.

But Mark chose to begin Jesus' ministry not in Nazareth, but nearby, at the Lake of Galilee. And his first disciples are chosen from there. What is it about these four men? They're mentioned in both Mark, Matthew and Luke. Peter and Andrew, James and John. Four commercial fishermen living in a port town called Capernaum on the north-west coast of the Sea of Galilee. Freshwater fishermen. Practical men who worked with their hands and their strength - working men. More concerned with how to pay the tax collector and the fishing rights and dock charges than on anything high-falutin'.

They certainly weren't among the powerful elite of Herod Antipas. Neither were they cultured Greek-speaking intellectuals or academics. They weren't rabbis either. Like their farming neighbours, they were ordinary men. In parenthesis, I sometimes feel that we ought to make this passage mandatory for those selecting possible ordinands!

We are told that James and John worked for their father, Zebedee, who also had some hired men. So they sound relatively prosperous. But their family responsibility - their culture - was therefore to stay with their father's business; to support the whole wider family structure. As you would. In their practical world, of keeping food on the table, I can't be sure that they, or Simon, or Andrew would have given much time in contemplation of the message of Jesus, that: "The kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news." And yet, we're told that they left their father Zebedee in the boat, and followed Jesus. Why?

In the very spare language of Mark, all we know is that "Jesus said to them: "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." Or as the King James version puts it more memorably, "I will make you fishers of men". To me, however, the phrase that absolutely throws me comes next: "And immediately they left their nets and followed him." "Immediately" is the correct translation from the Greek text. These conservative, ordinary men threw it all up. Their whole livelihood, their responsibilities, their families, everything. "Immediately". No ifs or buts. No "I'd like to follow you, but I'm in the middle of the fishing season; or ... I'll have to agree things with my father, come back next week (think of the call of Elisha and his hesitation); or ... well, we can all think of what we would say if we found ourselves, ahem, in the same boat. Heavens, I can't even take a snap decision from a restaurant menu (if we could somehow go to a restaurant!). Decisions that really matter, like, say, buying a new car, take quite some thought!

So, my question is, why did these ordinary men do what they did? Why did they act so out of character? Luke's Gospel account gives me some help in trying to understand. It fleshes out the story a bit, telling us that Jesus got into one of the boats and asked Simon to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds. In our culture, our leaders stand up to speak, but in those days, sitting down was the mark of one who taught with authority, a respected person. Were these four fishermen swayed by Jesus' words? After he had finished, Jesus had Simon put out into the deep water and let down his nets. A cynical, tired Simon retorted that they had fished all night and caught nothing; yet when he did so, miraculously, his nets caught so many fish that they almost broke. Then they filled two boats with fish until they almost sank.

Yet even then, when they had brought their boats to the shore, they left everything and followed him. If I experienced something like that, I might just think that this man was worth following! So, perhaps there we have some justification for leaving everything behind. This man is able to do miraculous things, such as they have never experienced before. ... Even so, would you follow him?

It still remains for me a profoundly supernatural story. I have never been even remotely influenced or encountered someone as charismatic as this. I can't say whether I would have done what they did.

Did their immediate decision bring them fame, riches and comfort? Not if you were Simon Peter! Yes, he was the first apostle among equals; a man of action, ardent and impetuous, the leader of the Apostles after the Resurrection. But as an old man he was martyred - in 64AD. James, along with Peter, was one of the Apostles present at the Transfiguration, but he was beheaded by Herod Agrippa in 44 AD.

Andrew and John are less well-known. Some traditions connect them to the writing of the Gospel of John, but I believe that the author was not that John. Tradition has it that Andrew was beheaded in Greece in 60 AD.

Apart from these grisly ends, what remains with me is the enormous adventure that they must have experienced from the day that Jesus called them, at the Lakeside in Galilee. It must have been so different to their previous existence! We certainly know who they are, even today. They are with the saints in glory. And that brings me to a conclusion of sorts. And it's very difficult to face it: Would I be prepared to stop everything I do and ... just ... blindly as it were ... follow someone like that? But, let me calm down for a

moment, and remember that Jesus was selecting his apostles. The rest of Jesus' disciples didn't give everything up just like these four. But what Jesus said and did during his ministry still exercises a hugely powerful influence on those who read or hear his word. Think of the difficulty which the Beatitudes gives to all of us! How acceptable is that in current business practice? The social justice message of Jesus' teaching is so counter to our culture that it can take a lot of nerve to follow his precepts. His actions in approaching the untouchables of Palestine, whether they were lepers or other unclean people, or prostitutes, or tax collectors – those outside the Pale – challenge us just as much today. Nevertheless, this Christian religion is, certainly for me, the most exciting and challenging thing in the world. But don't take my word for it - listen to the fabulous, life-changing account of the life of Jesus as Mark understood it, as we read through his Gospel this year.

This short tale reminds me that the kingdom of God came near. And that it can, again! Allow for the power of God breaking through to our world. It can, you know!

And now, to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be ascribed, as is most justly due, all honour, might, majesty, power and glory; Amen.

The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died and was buried;
he descended to the dead.

On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come again to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Catholic Church,
the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. **Amen.**

Intercessions, beginning with the Collect of the third Sunday after Epiphany

Almighty God,
whose Son revealed in signs and miracles
the wonder of your saving presence:
Renew your people with your heavenly grace,
and in all our weakness sustain us by your mighty power;
through Jesus Christ our Lord, **Amen**

Illumine the Church with the light of your truth. Keep her faithful to her one Lord, Jesus Christ, avoiding all contention and putting no trust in human strength alone. Lord, in your mercy...*Hear our prayer*

Shine with divine love on those who walk in darkness. Let the nations hear the gentle voice of your call and respond with joy, that there may be peace in place of strife. ...*Hear our prayer*

As the disciples were called to be fishers of men, make us obedient to the call to be ministers of the Gospel in our homes, our work, our community. Grant us insight to know where we can give help in the needs of friends and neighbours and in all our community, and grace to offer it ...*Hear our prayer*

As the Lord Jesus in his earthly ministry healed all kinds of sickness and disease, may his healing power come now to the sick and injured, for those severely affected by COVID-19, whether as carers or patients. Bless all at the front line of this pandemic who seek to relieve suffering. ...*Hear our prayer*

We remember before you those who were your disciples in this world and now rejoice in the great light of heaven. We give thanks for all who guided and nurtured us in our lives.

...*Hear our prayer*

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come,
thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory,
for ever and ever, Amen.

Dismissal:

The Lord bless you and watch over you,
the Lord make his face shine upon you
and be gracious to you,
the Lord look kindly on you
and give you peace;

and the blessing of God Almighty,
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,
be with you and remain with you always. **Amen.**

Live streamed from St. Matthew's Church, Irishtown.
Liturgy ©The Book of Common Prayer 2004
New Patterns for Worship ©The Archbishops' Council 2002
Sermon 2021 ©John Marchant