

AN INVITATION TO THE KINGDOM (Mark 1:14-20)

I began going to a church when I was about 13 years old. This year I turn 34 years old. It seems now, that my journey as a Christ-follower has been going on for a long time, but compared to others I am still just a child. It's been an unexpected journey. I could not have predicted that I would be here, now, as a pastor. I could not have foreseen the pain and difficulties, the cost of following Jesus, nor could I have predicted the privilege and joy of being his servant.

I wonder if Jesus' disciples had any idea what it meant when they decided to leave the life they knew and follow him. Did they *know* what they were getting themselves into? Did they have any idea WHO they were following? Did they know what it would cost?

And if they did... why, why follow Jesus?

[WHY follow?]

Have you ever asked yourself.... why, WHY follow Jesus? Why on earth be a Christ-follower, a "believer," a Christian? For many of you, you began following Jesus because you were brought up in a family of faith. But at some point you had to make the decision for yourself to continue. And even for those who decided to follow later in life, the question remains: why follow Jesus?

This question has another side to it though, for even if you do decide to follow after this Jewish carpenter... then you must ask yourself... HOW. How does one follow Jesus? How does one follow Jesus while studying, working, playing, raising kids, in Vancouver?

For many people, the answers aren't as easy as we may think. I don't think it was all that easy for those fishermen either. And Mark doesn't give any details. There's no internal monologue, not even external dialogue. All Jesus says to them is, "Come, follow me, and I will make you fish for people."

The older translation, as many of you are familiar with is "I will make you fisher of men." My reaction now, as a single woman is: "that hasn't worked too well, Jesus." And if your hope was to find the perfect spouse or have the perfect life, I'm sure you have been or will be, sadly disappointed.

So what are we to believe? That these men acted like robots and dropped what they were doing and went

with Jesus “at once” just as Mark wrote? Well, if we read the same account in Luke starting in chapter 4, we see more of the back story that Mark only hinted about. We know that Jesus begins his public ministry in Galilee after his wilderness experience, teaching in synagogues and proclaiming a message:

“The time has come, The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!”

So there was some time where he travelled around Galilee and taught. He taught near the lake, the sea of Galilee, and people gathered to listen. Could it be that Simon, Andrew, James and John all heard Jesus speak before this encounter by the lake? Did they witness something in Jesus that compelled them to follow?

[A different kind of kingdom]

Before we can understand Jesus and the women and men who followed him, we need to understand their context. For how can we understand important figures and their teachings like Gandhi or Nelson Mandela, or Martin Luther King Jr. without understanding the political, economic, and religious context that they emerged from?

The expression, “the Kingdom of God” is used by Jesus over a hundred times in the Gospels. The idea of the Kingdom of God or Heaven didn't suddenly appear. It was an expression found in rabbinic literature. It means “the rule of God as King.”¹ The idea is that there would be a time on earth where the commands of God (that is the Torah) would be obeyed rather than the Roman emperor. The Kingdom of God is the rule of God as King...THE King.

“Kingdom of God” was dangerous talk. Why? For one thing, there was already a Lord and saviour when Jesus was born.² That was Caesar Augustus. Caesar took on the title “son of a god” - and his rule meant conquest. The Romans came repeatedly into areas of resistance to destroy villages, enslave people, and execute rebels. They made an example of them by hanging them on crosses. It was a system of terror to subdue the populace into obedience. The people had to pay tribute; 12 1/2% of their crops were given to Rome – and if they didn't, there would be punishment. Jesus was born to and grew up in a society that was politically, economically, and religiously oppressed. There was what is called collective-trauma of the Roman conquest. Collective trauma is a psychological effect shared by a group of people, even an entire society. Think of the impact of 9-11, Hiroshima, and Haiti's earthquake.

¹ Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter, *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, Accordance Electronic ed. version 1.1. (InterVarsity Press, 2000).

² Brian McLaren, Richard Horsley, and Shane Claiborne, “Kingdom and Empire”, June 29, 2009, <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/encounter/kingdom-and-empire/3127512>.

The ancient people of Israel were a conquered people, an occupied people, but now, suddenly, a man begins heralding the rule of God... not the coming rule, but the present rule and kingdom of God. This was crazy talk, dangerous talk. Because the kingdom of God was directly opposed to the rule of Caesar.

What does the Kingdom of God look like? Instead of using detailed descriptions, Jesus uses parables: The kingdom of God is like a farmer scattering seed or like a mustard seed growing into a large tree (chapter 4) So we don't know what the Kingdom is exactly but we know what it is like. And according to the Lord's prayer, the rule of God means that the will of God will be done here on earth as it is in heaven. The people of Jesus' time knew that the rule of the Roman Empire did not align with the rule of God. The rule of God stood against the rule of the Roman Empire

[The allure of Counterfeit Kingdoms]

Perhaps in Canada, the Empire is not so clear. We're proud to stand against America, or at least their failed economy. Instead, I what I think we need to be more aware of is what writer James K.A. Smith calls the "counterfeit kingdom." Counterfeit kingdoms provide a vision of the good life. It tells us what will make us happy and successful. Counterfeit kingdoms tells us what we need to survive and flourish. And what makes counterfeit kingdoms so powerful, is that it takes hold of our desires. We are creatures that desire, for we are what we love.

We see counterfeit kingdoms expressed most clearly in media like advertisements. Advertisements aim to sell us the "good life" - what we should aspire to attain. I want to challenge us to think next time we watch a commercial: what is the good life that is being advertised?

[Discuss with your neighbour what you see being advertised as being "the good life"]

...To be carefree, independent, clean, sexy, perky and perfect? What happens to us when we see these pictures?

For one, we say, "that is not me, therefore, something is wrong with me"

These images impress a deep sense of lack, and therefore create a powerful sense of need

So, we say to ourselves, "I need that product to make me better." - drives us to purchase.

All this actually points to a deep desire for God, for the divine, for good. It just has been misdirected to other things.

So, before we can even begin to ask HOW do we follow Christ, we need to be aware of which kingdom we're actually serving or living in. What image of the good life are you trying to cultivate and pursue?

I want to propose that Jesus didn't convince these Galilean fishermen through intellectual debates or religious platitudes. But that Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God spoke directly to their hearts and desires. They wanted something different from what they have known. Jesus' call for repentance was call to recognize that there is something wrong in the world, in their lives. They could see that the rule of God wasn't happening... but they wanted it.

The Kingdom of God was near, it was at hand, it was happening. Jesus not only proclaimed and taught this... but invited people to join in.

[Come follow me, and I will make you fish for people]

This must have been odd for those fishermen to hear. What did Jesus mean?

For Jewish listeners, they might have associated “fishing” with God's judgement. In their scriptures, we we call the Old Testament, the image of fishing was used to describe God's judgement on people. (e.g., Eccles 9:12; Amos 4:2; Hab 1:15-17; Ezek 26:5, 14; 29:3-7).³

Ecc. 9:12 Moreover, no one knows when their hour will come:

As fish are caught in a cruel net,
or birds are taken in a snare,
so people are trapped by evil times
that fall unexpectedly upon them.

Amos 4:2 The Sovereign LORD has sworn by his holiness:

“The time will surely come
when you will be taken away with hooks,
the last of you with fishhooks.

People were described as being caught in nets of wickedness, they were trapped, or taken away with hooks for destruction. But this image of fishing changes with Jesus. Instead, the image becomes one associated with abundance and harvest. In Luke 5:1-8, Jesus goes out with the fishermen, their nets become overwhelmed with fish. There is plenty. [PICTURE] And God was not about catching people in nets to take them away for destruction, but to rescue, to save, to deliver.

When Jesus tells the disciples that he will make them fish for people, he means that they were no longer to fish for a living, but to fish for life. Their focus was no longer to be about their livelihood... but people. I don't know what Simon, Andrew, James and John were concerned about prior to meeting Jesus. Maybe they were just worried about survival or how to support their families. Maybe they had given up on God – because

³ Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, eds., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, Accordance electronic edition, version 1.1. (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1998).

the Romans seemed to controlled the whole world.

But here comes Jesus... who sees them and calls out to them while they were at their daily work. They were going to be fishers of people. Why? Because God's Kingdom is about life. It's about people. And God is using people to bring more people into the Kingdom, into life.

What kind of people does God use? There seems to be only one criterion: those who obey. Contrary to what popular speakers, pastors, theologians, might say... it's not about gender, social status, wealth, race, or sexual orientation. It's not even about what you've done in your past. It's about who responds now.

[The response: ... they left and they followed him]

Mark makes it simple. And he describes the appropriate response to the call of Jesus first with Simon and Andrew, and repeats it again with James and John. They left... and they followed him.

We can speculate about what they had to leave behind to follow Jesus, but I'm more interested in what God is calling us to leave behind to follow Jesus into life. This is a daily practice... not just something we do once. Jesus is always asking us to follow him, but he also knows what exactly we need to leave behind to do so.

It is a call to leave behind ways of death... which are sinful patterns in our lives? The things that Paul would refer to as "in the flesh." Idols, addictions (another form of idols), envy, malice, etc...

It is a call to leave behind things that oppress us and hold us down? Fallen dreams, failed expectations, destructive relationships, old memories, guilt.

Sometimes it is a call to leave behind good things.... in order to make space for God to do further work.

What is it he's asking you to leave?

The other part of the response is "to follow." How? Through worship. Worship is a huge category, it's a way of life. But often times we gloss over worship, because it's so big. When something becomes everything, then everything becomes nothing. So I want to focus on one particular idea of worship: habits.

We all have habits or ritual practices; we all have certain ways of doing things. What we don't often realize, is

that these habits or practices are formative, meaning, they actually shape our character and who we are. I'm not talking about things like brushing your teeth or eating cereal for breakfast. But things that inform our identity: like our education, who we associate with, what we do or watch for entertainment. The question we need to ask, is what sort of person would I become if I immerse myself in this practice? Furthermore, how will it impact the people around me?

For example. Let's say I have a habit of staying home. I never go out, nor do I invite people in. What kind of person would I become? Or perhaps I have a habit of buying new computers or cell phones every year. What values about consumption am I reinforcing? What if I spend all my time in one part of the city, and never interact with those of a different culture or socio-economic class?

If you're raising kids, you need to ask: what cultural forces are shaping your children in the practices you're engaging them in? What kind of person they will become if they always need new toys or clothes, or if they never learn to clean after themselves?

What kind of people, what kind of church, would we become if we immerse ourselves in the practice of prayer? What kind of people would we be if we had a practice of lament or confession? What kind of church will we become if we had a practice of serving our community?

We need to think about how we are being formed. Are we being formed into the kind of person, the kind of people, who embodies the Kingdom of God?"

Writer Brian McLaren asks, "... Are we living a religion in service to Empire? Or are we really proclaiming an alternative way of life?"⁴

Jesus is asking us to follow Him into His Kingdom, His "good life." To leave the empires and counterfeit kingdoms that draw our affections and desires. And it isn't a life that is without pain or suffering, because we all know where Jesus is going in this story...it's to the cross. And there is the conundrum, the curiosity, for before there can be any resurrected, new life, there must be death. So then, we must daily die to ourselves, to leave what is necessary to leave behind, and follow Him into life.

4 Ibid.

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