

The Right Time.
A Reflection on Mark 1:14–20
for the Sunday of the Word of God 2021

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After John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, «The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has drawn near; repent and believe in the gospel.»

And passing along by the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting in the sea—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, “Come on—behind me—and I will make you become fishers of people”. And immediately, leaving the nets, they followed him. And going on a little, he saw James [the son] of Zebedee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending the nets. And immediately he called them; and, leaving their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, they went off behind him.

I still can remember the shade of red on the book’s cover. I can still feel its weight, and I can remember the image: a sketch—a few lines—with Jesus pointing, clearly on the move, and these men following. And I can remember reading the story and its call, “Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men!” That’s the first Bible story I remember reading. I reckon I must have been about ten, but those words, that image, and that book—a catechism, one of the myriad in the early days after the Council—are as present today as they were in that classroom overlooking the Atlantic in the late 1960s.

That’s the thing about images: they stay with us. Pictures have a power: they can blot out other images. And not only good images, but ‘bad’ images, negative images, wounding and terrifying images can take away the light, and rob us of our peace. But the call and response of those fishermen was a good image. Fifty years on, I would recognize it as most likely one of those images which helped me discern my own vocation to priesthood, to mission and ministry. It gave clarity and direction: “Leave it all behind! “Go after Jesus!”

Like Peter and Andrew, James and John, everything was blissfully straightforward! Like Peter, Andrew, James and John, I had no awareness of the ‘backstory,’ or indeed the ‘front-story.’ Peter *was* Saint Peter, Andrew *was* Saint Andrew, James was clearly *Saint* James, and John was *Saint* John. And they followed *immediately*—and without question. They were apostles after all! How else would things be?

Reading Mark we discover a different story. Peter and his companions ran away. Those who had run *after* Jesus, ran *away*. When Jesus became trouble, and when he was killed, they went back to their boats and the nets, back to fishing for fish, back to ‘normal’ horizons, to ‘ordinary’ lives. Of course, the signs had been there all along: “they’re all looking for you” they told Jesus, but his interest was in “going to the next towns, that he might preach there too” (1:39). Had they not wanted to “send the crowds away,” while he had wanted to feed them? (6:35–37). Did he not have to rebuke Peter who baulked at Jesus’ prophecy of his passion? (8:32–33). Had James and John not secretly come to Jesus, seeking places at his right and his left in his hour of glory? (10:37). So when their ways parted, it may have been shocking—as realizations frequently can be, but surprising it was not.

Jesus and his disciples were on different paths. Jesus: pointing to God, engaging the outcast. The disciples—pointing to themselves, caught up in their own importance:

John said, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we forbade him, because he was not following us.” But Jesus said, “Do not forbid him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able, soon after, to speak evil of me. For the one that is not against us, is for us” (9:38–39).

We wonder what was going on. As it turns out, the evangelist was giving us clues right from the beginning: *immediately* (1:18) is not always a good word in Mark! The seed that falls on rocky ground, “springs up *immediately* but perishes, because it had no depth of soil” (4:5). When he had shamed his opponents in the synagogue healing of the man with the withered hand, they “went out, and *immediately* held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him” (3:6).

So *immediately* is a word of shadow in the Gospel of Mark. The mustard seed does not grow up *immediately* to “become the greatest of all shrubs, and [let] the birds of the air can dwell in its shade.” (4:32). It needs time. And the seed sown by the farmer which “sprouts and grows, he knows not how” (4:27). It also needs time. It needs time—and must be given time—so that “the earth can produce of itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear” (4:28). Growth needs time.

And people need time. We need time to grow. We need time to recover. We need time to understand. We need to see. We need time to hear. Peter and Andrew, James and John could leave home *immediately*. That was the easy part! But figuring out what had happened wasn’t so easy. Finding the depth of soil would come slowly—built on the painful recognition of abandonment and denial, and on the recognition of the one who never lost faith in them.

Let us not fool ourselves in thinking that the light of the resurrection came rapidly flooding into Galilee, and changed everything! The one who was raised was—and remained—the crucified one: “You seek Jesus, the Nazarene, the crucified one. He has been raised! He is *not* here!” (16:6). The Risen One remains the Wounded One. His wounds, his precious wounds—are not washed away. For Jesus and for us, they are the touchstone of salvation.

In raising his wounded and abandoned Son, God not only reveals his presence, but sends Jesus back to Galilee to call again his wounded and battered disciples: “he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you” (16:7) In the resurrection, God’s kingdom draws nearer (see 1:15).

But when he comes back and calls again, will things be the same? Will Peter and Andrew, James and John—whoever they might be—again race to follow him? Or will they hear what he says again and again, “The time is *now* fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has *now* drawn nearer; let your heart be softened, and trust in the good news of God.”

The seed needs time. We need time. Even Jesus needed time. But his Father—the One to whom he pointed (see 10:18), the One whose gospel he proclaimed, whose good news he embodied in word and embrace, that One has time and He is faithful. He will wait.

But there is more! “*The dawn is ours before we knew it*”¹. “The Kingdom of God has drawn near.” The day brightens ever before we see the sun. God’s kingdom is drawing near. Its bread is already in our hands, its wine on our lips. It draws near in the generous (see 12:44), the gentle (see 1:41), in those who care (see 7:26), who trust against the odds (see 5:36), in those who carry their neighbour (2:3); it draws near in the

¹ Amanda Gorman, American Youth Poet Laureate, from her poem “The Hill We Climb” composed for, and read at, the inauguration of the US President on January 20th, 2021.

word (4:14). The lamp has come in, it is no longer under a bushel! (see 4:22). The Kingdom has drawn near to us. "*The dawn is ours before we knew it*". What will we do? What will happen this time?