

Sunday, January 24, 2021

Third Sunday after Epiphany

Introduction

As we continue through the time after Epiphany, stories of the call to discipleship show us the implications of our baptismal calling to show Christ to the world. Jesus begins proclaiming the good news and calling people to repentance right after John the Baptist is arrested for preaching in a similar way. Knowing that John was later executed, we see at the very outset the cost of discipleship. Still, the two sets of brothers leave everything they have known and worked for all their lives to follow Jesus and fish for people.

Prayer of the Day

P Almighty God, by grace alone you call us and accept us in your service. Strengthen us by your Spirit, and make us worthy of your call, through Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord.

C Amen.

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

The book of Jonah is a comedy starring a reluctant prophet who is given a one-sentence message: Nineveh will be destroyed in forty days. Much to Jonah's dismay, the people of Nineveh repent. The point of the story is to get the reader to wrestle with the question "On whom should God have mercy?"

¹The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, ²"Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." ³So 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. ⁴Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" ⁵And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

¹⁰When 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.

Psalm 62:5-12

⁵For God alone I wait in silence;
truly, my hope is in God.

⁶God alone is my rock and my salvation,
my stronghold, so that I shall never be shaken.

⁷In God is my deliverance and my honour;
God is my strong rock and my refuge.

⁸Put your trust in God always, O people,
pour out your hearts before the one who | is our refuge.

R/ God alone is my rock and my salvation.

⁹Those of high degree are but a fleeting breath; those of low estate cannot be trusted.
Placed on the scales together they weigh even less than a breath.

¹⁰Put no trust in extortion; in robbery take no empty pride;
though wealth increase, set not your heart upon it.

¹¹God has spoken once, twice have I heard it,
that power belongs to God.

¹²Steadfast love belongs to you, O Lord,
for you repay all according to their deeds.

R/ *God alone is my rock and my salvation.*

Mark 1:14-20

Before Jesus calls his first disciples, he proclaims a message that becomes known as "the gospel" or good news from God. God is ready to rule our lives. Those who realise this will respond with repentance and faith.

¹⁴Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

¹⁶As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. ¹⁷And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." ¹⁸And immediately they left their nets and followed him. ¹⁹As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. ²⁰Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

Sermon

Jesus' Mysterious Ways

*From the outset of his public ministry Jesus does things in such a strange way
That we are led to wonder whether we've got some things bout God wrong*

We've probably all used the expression "God moves in a mysterious way."

It sounds like Scripture.

But it's from a hymn, whose text was composed by William Cowper, who was born in 1774.

Here's the first verse, to give you a taste of it:

*God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea
And rides upon the storm.*

The line is quoted
when we're having a hard time understanding what God is up to.

As the Gospel of Mark gets rolling
it turns out that Jesus acts strangely too.

He goes to the Jordan,
and allows John baptise him,
and then hears God speaking to him.

On the wilderness side of the Jordan
he camps out with wild beasts,
and faces his Temptation.

In the face of poverty, Roman occupation,
and all the other things that trouble us,
like illness, work, boredom, loneliness...
he declares that God's reign on earth is about to begin.

He chooses Galilee as the starting place for his ministry.

And he selects four fishermen to be his first disciples, students, successors.

All by the midway point of the first of 16 chapter.

If we didn't know better we'd think he was one of those kooky prophets.

You know,
like Ezekiel who had visions that sound as if was on drugs,
or Hosea who called his children insulting names
to make a point about Israel's faithlessness.

We take the start of Jesus' mission for granted,
because we've heard the story so often,
but he's not at all what we or the world expect.

We might image, instead, a series of special effects
as an adult Jesus floats down from the heavens;
streams of light and a chorus of angels in the background.

All making any inauguration of a president
or the swearing in of a Prime Minister
look flat and dull.

Soon thereafter he would be the one barking orders.

And then single-handedly taking on Satan,
all without breaking a sweat

or having even having one hair fall out of place.

There would be no real, exhausting Temptation,
or any doubt about the outcome.

And not in remote Galilee, 2000 years ago,
but in the age of communication,
perhaps in New York, London or Beijing
for billions of eyes to see.

There would be, for this immortal, no need for students and helpers.

Certainly not commoners.

And in the end no betrayal, or arrest, or trials, or death.

Which means that if Jesus *is* the Son of God
he surprises us.

And unsettles us.

Because his strangeness
leads back to his Father.

Through the things Jesus does,
and the things he says,
he tells us all that some of the things we believe about God are mistaken.

Which is what the rest of this green season,
and the purple one that follows it
are going to reminds us.

God is not a controlling brute,
but a loving (and therefore suffering) companion.

Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

P Guided by Christ made known to the nations, let us offer our prayers for the church, the world, and all people in need.

A brief silence.

A For skies and seas, for birds and fish, for favourable weather and clean water, and for the well-being of creation, that God raise up advocates and scientists to guide our care for all the earth, let us pray.

C Have mercy, O God.

A For the church throughout the world, for pastors and teachers, for deacons and deaconesses, and for musicians and servers, that all proclaim the good news of God's reconciling love, let us pray.

C Have mercy, O God.

A For the Christian-Jewish Dialogue of Montreal, and all who seek to foster understanding and compassion among the world's religions, that together we might see God more clearly, let us pray.

C Have mercy, O God.

A For those who provide leadership in our cities and around the world, for non-profit and non-governmental organisations, for planning commissions and homeless advocates, that God inspire all people in the just use of wealth, let us pray.

C Have mercy, O God.

A For those who are sick, distressed, or grieving; for the outcast and all who await relief (*especially*), that in the midst of suffering, God's peace and mercy surround them, let us pray.

C Have mercy, O God.

A For our congregation and community, for families big and small, and for the organisations that meet here during the week, that God's steadfast love serve as a model for all relationships, let us pray.

C Have mercy, O God.

A In thanksgiving for our ancestors in the faith whose lives serve as an example of gospel living, that they point us to salvation through Christ, let us pray.

C Have mercy, O God.

P Merciful God, hear the prayers of your people, spoken or silent, for the sake of the one who dwells among us, your Son, Jesus Christ our Saviour.

C Amen.

Offering Prayer

A O God,
receive these gifts as you receive us:
like a mother receives her child, with arms open wide.
Nourish us anew in your tender care,

and empower us in faithful service
to tend to others with this same love,
through Jesus Christ, our saving grace.

C Amen.

Blessing

P God the creator strengthen you;
Jesus the beloved fill you;
and the Holy Spirit the comforter † keep you in peace.

C Amen.

Dismissal

A Go in peace. Be the light of Christ.

C Thanks be to God.

Upcoming Commemorations

Conversion of Paul

Monday, January 25, 2021

The week of prayer begun by the remembrance of Peter's confession now comes to an end as we recall the pivotal moment in the life of the other pillar of the early church, the apostle Paul. His encounter with the risen Christ turned him from persecutor of the followers of Christ to one of their leaders.

Timothy, Titus, and Silas, missionaries

Tuesday, January 26, 2021

These three early Christian men were missionary companions of the apostle Paul. Timothy became bishop of Ephesus, Titus bishop of Crete, and Silas was imprisoned with Paul at Philippi until they were delivered by an earthquake.

Lydia, Dorcas, and Phoebe, witnesses to the faith

Wednesday, January 27, 2021

Women as well as men were important Christian leaders from the beginning, as demonstrated by these coworkers of the apostle Paul. Lydia, a seller of purple goods, lent her home for a church; Dorcas was known for charitable works; and Phoebe was a deacon in the church at Cenchrae.

Thomas Aquinas, teacher, died 1274

Thursday, January 28, 2021

One of the most brilliant and creative theologians in the church's history, Aquinas worked to bring together scripture and the philosophy of Aristotle. A member of the Order of Preachers (Dominicans), Aquinas was also a hymnwriter.