

## **The Time is Fulfilled: No Time for Half-Hearted Commitment**

Our passage from Mark's gospel that I read to you just a bit earlier does not include reference to Jesus' baptism. However, the description of Jesus' baptism and what took place helps us to understand the sequel:

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Now, I think it is perhaps somewhat instructive to compare this—this passage of scripture, and how Jesus is commissioned, shall we say (more than that, of course; that's the minimum we can see about that baptism)—But I think it's instructive to compare what happened there with the calling of the prophets of the Old Testament.

Now, obviously, I am not going to describe in great detail or with numerous examples all that could be said on that subject. But, frequently, the prophets, when they are called—it's described as these individuals somehow being in the "council of God". Now, one of the most well-known examples of that is from the prophet Isaiah, recorded in the book of the prophet Isaiah, where Isaiah says, "I saw the LORD high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple..." And it describes the seraphim and a seraph taking a coal and touching it to his mouth—he, Isaiah—who exclaimed that he was a "man of unclean lips" who lived among a people of unclean lips. And then, Isaiah, the prophet, heard the words, "Who will we send?" And Isaiah said, "Send me." So the depiction of that call of the prophet is as though he is in the council of the LORD.

There are other examples of this from 1 Kings, for example. There is one prophet, by the name of Micaiah ben Imlah; and this prophet is accused by the king of saying always nasty things about him. In any case, Micaiah ben Imlah, describes how he was in the council of God, and he heard words and responded to them.

Now, a characteristic of a false prophet can be found in the book of Jeremiah. And let me just read you the relevant passage:

I did not send the prophets [this is the LORD speaking],  
yet they ran;  
I did not speak to them,  
yet they prophesied.  
But if they had stood in my council,  
then they would have proclaimed my words to my people,  
and they would have turned them from their evil way,  
and from the evil of their doings.

So, again, being a prophet is depicted as somehow speaking from being in the council of the LORD.

Well, what we have with the baptism of Jesus is, in essence—"the heavens opened, the voice of heaven came". Associated with that was the descent or giving of the Spirit, so that the Spirit descended upon Jesus like a dove. And the words are not, "You are my prophet..." but "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you, I am well-pleased." So there are similarities, in a way;

but there are decisive differences—chiefly, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

We learn that Jesus is then driven into the wilderness where he is tempted by the devil, by Satan. But, after that, “after John was arrested, Jesus,” we are told, “came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God...” and our passage begins at that point.

Now, here again, if we do a comparison with the prophets, we find that, for example, there was a prophet found in the book of Isaiah, who has a whole message to relay that is “good news”. In fact, it is the first portion of the Old Testament which uses that expression, “good news”. And it’s from the book of Isaiah, chapter 40, where the words are,

Get you up to a high mountain,  
O Zion, herald of good tidings... [“good news”]

Jesus [by comparison] says,

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news [the gospel].”

But, in the message from Isaiah, it’s all prefaced by a question, “A voice says, ‘Cry out!’” And the prophet responds, “What shall I cry?” But, in Mark’s gospel, there is no such thing. Jesus simply speaks and says,

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

Where is this kingdom that has drawn near? In what way is time being fulfilled? Well, evidently, although Jesus does not say so—in his very person. So he doesn’t speak as a prophet. He speaks as the Son, the Beloved, with whom the Father is well-pleased.

Now, Jesus goes along by the Sea of Galilee, and he remarks to Simon and Andrew who are in their boat fishing, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” Here again, this is quite different than anything found in the Old Testament, especially from the prophets. The prophets would have said, “The LORD seeks justice and righteousness. Follow the commands of the LORD. Be true to God.” But, in this case, Jesus’ words are very simple, “Follow me... Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” So the person is now the guide rather than the whole series of commandments, or the interpretation of the commandments by the rabbis. We have simply, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.”

So something very decisive is happening here: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” And where is that “good news”? It’s not said directly; but it is in the person of the Son. And then, this same person says—not, “follow the commandments of the LORD; be true to the LORD; but instead says—“Follow me...”

Now, in the latter part of the words that Jesus says to Simon and Andrew, “Follow me *and I will make you fish for people*” (or the more traditional translation, “I will make fishers of men, fishers of people, those who catch people.”) Again, the wording is unlike anything you could find in a prophet. The prophet would have said—the prophet Isaiah would have said, “If you listen [speaking on behalf of the LORD], then I will make your sins which are like scarlet, become white as snow or white as wool.” Or, from the prophet Jeremiah, speaking on behalf of

the LORD, “I will make a new covenant with you, I will write my commandments on your heart; and my Spirit will be with you.” Well, we don’t have that sort of language here, as it’s indirectly expressed by a prophet; we have the words, “I will make you fish for people.” So Jesus takes the place of God as he has made himself known in the Old Testament. There is no one else, actually, who can make people different than they are, except God. Jesus says, “Follow me, and *I will make* you fish for people.”

And again, what is this “fish for people”? What is he talking about there? This is unlike anything really that the Old Testament has to offer, although there are passages from the Old Testament which do speak in this vein. What Jesus is promising is that he will make these people part of God’s missionary or missional purpose or gracious purpose for the world. He will involve them in all of that. He will make their lives into the quality which reaches out and draws in people to the kingdom.

One of the accusations levelled against Jesus was that he was a deceiver; he led people away from God. And you could see how that accusation could be levelled at Jesus, just by his manner of speech. He doesn’t say, “Thus says the Lord, ‘The time is fulfilled...’” He simply says, “The time is fulfilled; the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news.” He doesn’t mention any Greater One coming after him. He says to these people, “Follow me...” He doesn’t say, “Attend to what the rabbis are telling you again and again...Be attentive to the various laws you have heard.” No, he says, “Follow me...” And he also promises that he will *make* people do or be in a certain way: “I will make you fish for people.” All of that is something that could well lead to that accusation that he is a deceiver; he is leading people away from true service of God.

And so, as the Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, says, repeatedly, “There is a choice with Jesus; the choice is, you can be offended at him, or you can believe.” And Jesus said, “Blessed are those who take no offence at me.”

In fact, this person who said these words—it’s as though he says these words now, and to us, because it calls for the same response as was expected of the people who would become disciples of Jesus. “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news,” which I, as the Son, exemplify. He doesn’t say that directly. But there it is. There is the challenge to believe, rather than to take offence at this person.

And he says to us, as he said to those disciples, “Follow me...” Now, there are all sorts of persons we could follow. Is this really the right one whom we are to follow? Are we ready to stake everything on following this one? Or are we going the wrong course? Are we being deceived? The challenge that comes to us too is not, “Be attentive to my teachings”, not “Follow all the commands of the Old Testament.” No, “Follow me.” And that’s the challenge that comes to us. Will we follow or will we leave Jesus somehow in the distant past, and have his words recorded in Scripture, but leave it at that?

And then again, the challenge comes to us with those words, “I will make you fish for people.” If we do believe, rather than are offended at him; if we do follow him, rather than relegating him to the dustbin of history; if we see him as a our contemporary, now, challenging us to follow him, then, our hearts will be laid open to him; our hearts will be judged by him; but our hearts will also be transformed by him; and he will make us fish for people; he will make us part of this gracious purpose of God that he embodies for the world. And we will be changed.

We will be people who forgive our neighbour, who reach out to someone in need; who care for others and pray for them.

So, this passage opens to us choices that we have. Will we be offended? Or will we believe? Will we simply attend to various teachings or will we follow him? And, if we follow him, there is the further challenge that we will be changed. It will be a life-changing decision on our part, because God will include us, will involve us, in his purposes for the world, loving purposes, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The challenge is out—“Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.”