

Our Gospel today is very stark as it places us right at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. John the Baptist had been arrested by King Herod, and his arrest left a vacuum that Jesus felt called to step into. Yet, instead of staying near the Jordan to baptise people as John had done, Jesus went into Galilee, and going from town to town, he made his call of repentance, - only it had a different twist. He told people: "The time has come, and the Kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent, and believe the Good News."

Immediately after that news-headline St. Mark mentions the call of Peter, Andrew, James and John, to follow Jesus, and become 'fishers of men and women'. It is very stark, as if these four men knew no more than the headline I just mentioned. We know from the Gospel of St. John that Andrew and Peter (and maybe John as well) had met Jesus already, when they had gone to listen to John the Baptist by the Jordan, and heard John point Jesus out, saying: "There is the Lamb of God."

As we heard last weekend Andrew and his companion followed Jesus and were invited to spend the rest of the day with him, - and heard enough to convince Andrew that Jesus was the Messiah. So they had a bit more information available to them than just the headline, and that is what I'd like to follow through.

Jesus spoke about the Kingdom or the reign of God being at hand. What is our understanding of that term? For us who live in the British Commonwealth of Nations we recognise that we are connected with a kingdom somewhere, but it's elsewhere, on the other side of the world, and if it does have any effect on us, it is rather benign. On the other hand we can talk about a reign of terror, and that is something that sends fear into our hearts, even though its threat comes from elsewhere. It is anything but Good News.

So when Jesus spoke with Andrew and his companion, and later on when he was on the hustings in Galilee, it must have been something quite different, something that fired people's imagination, something that was visionary, that's able to fire up people even in our own day. In some way it has to do with the call to repent, but different from the usual way in which we look at repentance, which has rather more negative connotations, like sitting in sackcloth and ashes.

Jesus took a different tack, by not focussing on failings but on possibilities. He focussed on what people could become! That is easy with people who recognise their sinfulness, but a lot harder with those who consider themselves to be good people. It's like trying to get people who think of themselves as healthy to go to a doctor, - they can't see anything wrong with them, while others notice the imperfections that could be so much better if they did something about them. A good case in point is the Scribes and Pharisees, who were, basically, good people but they could not see their weaknesses, and that led to their condemnation of Jesus.

To answer the call of Jesus to repent or to change you need to feel a dissatisfaction with yourself, and have a longing for something better. There must be a sense of something wrong, or at least that something is missing. A conversion experience begins with the realization that we are not what we could or should be, and that is what Jesus was playing on.

To take on board the call to repentance or change demands openness, honesty, humility and above all courage, - the courage to put an end to self-deception, and to confront a painful reality, - the courage to admit one's failings, to ask for forgiveness, and the resolve to change.

Jesus, in his ministry, was able to talk about change or repentance as a very positive thing. True, to repent is to admit that all is not well with oneself, but it is also to discover something rather wonderful, namely that there are, - and that you have - possibilities which you did not recognise you had. It means the willingness and the ability to acquire a new vision, taking a new direction, setting yourself more worthwhile goals and living by better values. In a word, it opens the way to a new life, - and, understood like that, repentance is exciting, and always leads to joy.

That's what Jesus was able to convey, and for those who accepted his words a new world began to take shape, where evil was driven out, the sick, the blind, the deaf and the lame were healed, and the poor experienced compassion and support. Good News was seen and felt, and that is still the case where the words of Jesus are taken seriously, and lives begin to change. May God give each one of us the hunger and the courage to be part of it.