

The Avenue Uniting Church

Sunday 14th January, 2024

"Greater Together..."

Mark 1:4-14

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

As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, 'Follow me and I will make you fish for people.' And immediately they left their nets and followed him.

As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

Sought and Caught Jennie Gordon

It begins with a look
more than mere casual glance
it's the look of longing
because he can't go it alone.

Eyes connect and more is heard
without words
than with the simple command
"Follow me",
and all there seems to be
are reasons to resist.

How can I follow this man
that I struggle to understand
whose words weave baskets
filled from nought
whose love I sense,
but never sought?

On a journey that's perplexing
sacrificial and arresting,
astounding and confounding
healing, testing, never resting

Destination quite unclear,
open-ended, undefined
just "follow me", he says,
"follow me, leave all behind"

And you can struggle to be free
but being caught is liberty.



(From: Dad & Daughter,
Revs Ron and Jennie Gordon)

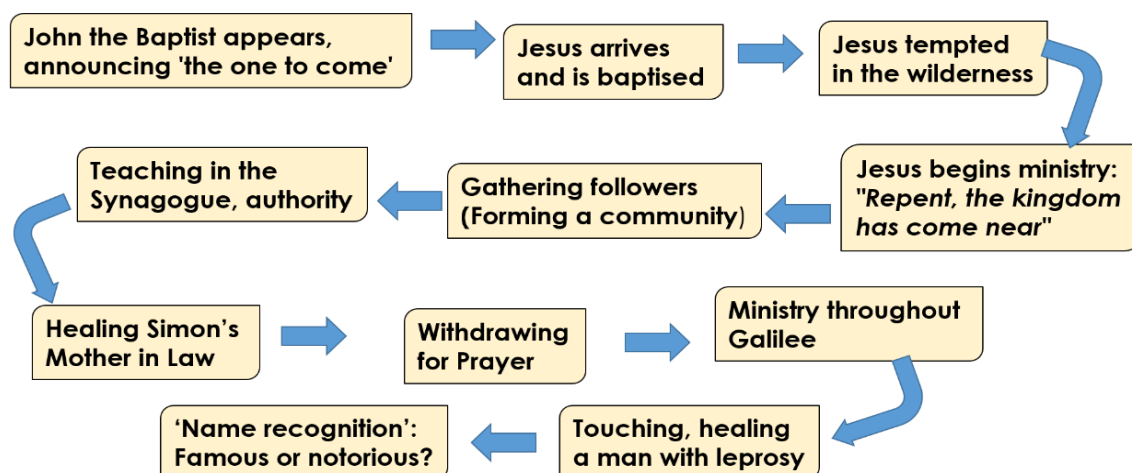
I've come to a new appreciation of this story from Mark's Gospel! Two things have helped that to happen for me.

One is something I try to do pretty regularly: to 'zoom out' and look at several stories together rather than just the bits of a story that we're presented with by the lectionary. When we do that, we generally find that 'the story' carries over a few 'Bible passages' or sections, and the flow of the bigger narrative draws us deeper into what's going on.

The first chapter of Mark's Gospel is an especially good example of this.

If we 'map' the chapter, we see a flow which sets the tone for everything that follows in Mark's story of Jesus, drawn from the oral stories of the Jesus community.

It looks something like this:



And that's just chapter 1!!

'Zooming out' from a particular passage or story expands our sense of what's going on, and very often helps us to look more helpfully at that passage. That was true for me as I prepared for this Witness, and it's why today's reading overlaps with last week's.

The story of Jesus beginning to gather followers finds its context for Mark as a foundational part of his ministry: before he teaches, before all the miracle stories, Jesus begins to form a community

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I mentioned two things that have helped my appreciation of this story. The second is a reflection by a colleague Graeme at a service just before Christmas, talking about John the Baptist. It was a really helpful 'zooming out' experience for me, and offered me a whole new perspective that I'd like to share with you. (It may not be new to you, but it was to me!)

Graeme's theme was set by a story later in the later gospels where Jesus says of John:

*"Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."*

His approach was this:

*John was an individual: a 'larger than life' character, for sure, but an individual. He was the leader of a community, and Jesus was probably one of his disciples, but the community was centred around the person – and personality – of John. His ministry was about the baptism of individuals for the personal forgiveness of their sins.*

*When Jesus moved out into his own ministry, however, his focus and approach was different: He focused less on individuals' sinfulness, and more on their place in the community of GOD's people. His call was to imagination of a community living the ways and values of GOD, and to response by letting those ways and values shape their life together.*

*The 'greatness' of an individual came through participation in the community of GOD's people, said Jesus. Even the 'least' in the community was greater than John the individual, because the community together would be and do greater things.*

I've spent a lot of time thinking about this, and what it means for people and communities today, and have found it a very helpful way of thinking. I appreciated Graeme's wisdom and insight.

Two things emerged for me about the biblical part of this:

- How individual WAS John, given that he had disciples? and...
- Was Graeme overstating Jesus' emphasis on creating community?

Relating to the first question, it's a little hard to say, given that we don't actually know too much about John outside of the Gospels. There's some evidence that his followers formed a community which became a religion (the Mandeans) still in existence today, but it's not clear that John's followers continued long after his death. (It's believed that some became followers of Jesus).

About Jesus and community, though, the picture is actually lots clearer. I believe that Graeme was right when he spoke of Jesus forming community as the foundation of his ministry, and seeing 'greatness' in communal terms rather than individual. So much of what he taught and showed his followers was about what the community should be like, and what it should be about.

And let's not forget that, although Jesus didn't ignore life beyond this world, living life in this world as a people of GOD was his primary focus. His parables called people to imagine what life could like if, together, they turned around and lived as if the Kingdom or 'way' (or 'community'?) was truly present in the world, as he believed. The Jewish vision of that way – 'Shalom' – was ALL about the community, not the individual.

*"But surely..."* we might object, *"Christianity is fundamentally centred around the character of Jesus the Christ"* And that's true. **But looking at the Gospels, I think we see pretty clearly that that wasn't Jesus' intention!**

*"Why do you call me good? Only GOD is good."*

*"And seeing that they wanted to make him king, he disappeared from among them"* etc.

And much more in the same vein.

We know that it was some time after his death came to see Jesus as the message of GOD, rather than as the messenger – Jesus himself resisted it. He never set out to found a church.

It was never about him... always about the Spirit of GOD at work in and through the community, and the call to respond. Creating a community to pay attention was the priority.

Well this is all good, isn't it...?

I wonder if it says anything to us today, as people of a church. I think it does.

One thing it said to me as I listened that day was to remind me that the ministry of the church – this church or any church – isn't my job. It's our job.

I have a particular role to play in that job, and so does each one of us.

The life or death of a church community doesn't rest on 'the minister', or on any bright ideas he or she might come up with, but on the culture of the community: attending, discerning, and responding to its sense of the Holy Spirit's leading.

The other thing I heard again that day is that we are 'greater together'. We've known this since the very beginning - the biblical witness of the Old and New testaments are littered throughout with this understanding - and it's good to be reminded regularly of this truth.

We're greater together when we care for one another, and for the people around us.

We're greater together when we share our sacred stories.

We're greater together when we sit here on Sundays in the quietness of prayer,

holding each other's precious delights and sorrows, and holding the light of hope for the world.

We're greater together when we imagine the world renewed, and respond where we are,

however we can.

We're greater together when the life of this community somehow points beyond itself,

to the holy LIFE in whom we live, move, and have our being.

Greater together? Absolutely – It's who we are!

**Grow 4 your life!**

Listen. Remember. Share. Act.