

# Third Sunday after Epiphany

24.01.2021  
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## Introduction

The drama of Mark's gospel continues. After the opening scene (of John the Baptist in the desert), we are now brought to the main focus: Jesus of Nazareth. He has been baptised; a voice has been heard from heaven confirming him as the Son, the Beloved; he has been driven into the wilderness to be tempted — and in Mark's telling, Jesus is with the wild beasts and the angels there —; and now, here we are in Galilee, and Jesus is announcing his mission and calling followers.

In a week with much attention to an inauguration in the United States, the lectionary brings us to consider questions of leadership, following, authority and the true demonstratoin of justice.

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## Text

Mark 1:14–20

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 sea—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.

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## Comment

For much of 2021 we will be in the company of the gospel according to Mark. The earliest gospel, this is also the text that pays least attention to sermons of Jesus, preferring instead to highlight Jesus' actions.

The text of this first gospel gallops along at breathtaking speed. The first chapter has so many “and then”s that were you to hear it read aloud, you'd get a better sense of the text's pace than simply by reading it in shorter sections. Mark is keen

to get to the action, and by the time we have arrived at today's reading — that of Jesus announcing his mission and calling followers — we have already been introduced to John the Baptist, been in the desert with him, seen scenes of citizens — people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem — foretelling what we are now reading. Jesus has been baptised, confirmed in his belovedness, driven to the wild, tempted and returned. All, so far, in thirteen short verses. Phew.

Now, we see Jesus. Were this to be a stage play, much attention would be given to the first words to be uttered by Jesus, as — thus far — he has not spoken. Here he is now, and his first words are:

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

Jesus speaks these words in the aftermath of the arrest of his cousin. John has been arrested for telling the truth, for causing gatherings of unlikely people to congregate together, hearing messages that asked them to deconstruct their sectarianism and instead consider the ethics of how they should live. John knows that it is not his own message he should alert people to, but rather that of the “one who is more powerful than I”. In Mark's schema, we hear nothing of the familial relationship between John and Jesus. What we do hear is a story of two men who can each draw a crowd.

What is it in the human condition that alerts some to follow? As a child I remember playing *follow the leader*, where a child would lead a snaking line of children, and the leader would pat their head, or hop, or wiggle their arse, and all the followers would do the same, until such time as a new leader was chosen. How were they chosen? It depended on the governance — or tyranny — established. In some groups it was always the same leader. Dennis, I remember, couldn't abide for anyone else to lead but him. In other groups, clarity of succession was established. Cáit was adept at establishing the rules for leadership handover.

All of this is pertinent, I suppose, in the ways that children's games are not just children's games, but practisings for adulthood. This week, there is an inauguration in the United States that has garnered much attention in the stories of resistance to it, threats to it, and drama around it. If you can't lead, I remember learning, then at least get attention. Elsewhere too, I know, there are stories of resistance to change, flouting of established systems, and civil wars that are exploited for the benefit of few at the expense of many.

Questions to do with a community's desire to follow — or an individual's desire to lead — go deep in our psyche. Who sets the rules? What counts as fair? What does concession look like? What kind of character is rewarded? When religion comes into play — where, for instance, it is discerned that a person is the *chosen one of God*, beloved even — what happens to the rules of fair game? The drama of this week's news is alerting our attention to how communities of people pay attention to — by either following, or bending, or ignoring, or destroying — the rules of the game of governance, according to what outcome they deem to be ordained.

In all of this, we see the foregrounding of conflict. In all of this, our hearts are hoping for these three things: justice, safety, flourishing.

The mission of Jesus as announced here, is one of good news. Good news for what? Jesus is speaking to a population of people under occupation from a foreign army. He is speaking to a population of people shocked perhaps that an eccentric recluse — a preacher in the wilderness — could be arrested. In the background to this

week's text we see a model of leadership that asserts itself in dominance, threat, arrests, beheadings that are surely a warning to others. And in the midst of this, we hear Mark describe a character of self assuredness in Jesus, a man with no other claim to authority than his integrity and assuredness. It is surely the project of Mark to paint Jesus as worthy of trust and a rightful voice of the deepest justice and authority.

Next week we will hear the people's reponse to Jesus "What is this? A new teaching — with authority!" Remember, this is Mark's gospel. He isn't interested in fancy words. The Jesus of Mark has little time for long speeches. He acts. He shows that he is intersted in acting on the oppressions that are oppressing people, loosing them from what is binding them. Mark is not afraid of portraying Jesus' authority being challenged either: we will meet a Syrophonician woman later this year who highlights Jesus' crass words about foreigners and challenges him – with her own words – to act according to the identity he is extolled for. He listens. He responds. He acts accordingly and praises her for her words. In Mark's model of justice, actions speak the gospel, and if words follow, well then they follow. Where there is bluster and puffing up it is exposed and deflated. It, like the cities of empire, will fall. In all of this, there is a strange character of Jesus, arriving — it seems — out of nowhere, with a message that causes justice to be realised in the here and now.

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## Response

In a week where attention is being arrested by someone who does not wish to move, a certain singularity about leadership is being promoted; i.e. "him or me". However, what we know is that we all follow along with different authorities at different times — the sytem in our friendship groups, workplaces, places of exercise or entertainment, health or home. We give authority and we take it away, based on our capacity, freedoms and judgment. In the disrupting narratives this week is fantasising about bringing, we may do well to recall the authority and mission, leadership and following that we take up or bestow with ease, because of trust, because of justice, because it leads to flourishing, because it is not based on a threat, because it is based on demonstration rather than demand.

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## Prayer

Strange Jesus  
out of the desert you came,  
a strange man with no story other  
than one of love and language.

Turn us to use language for the purposes of love:  
love enacted; love seen, love demonstrated;  
and exchanged; love lived, even to the end.

We ask this because love called you,  
and we try to follow.

Amen.

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## Further Reading

Alec McCowen's solo recitation of the entirety of Mark's Gospel gives a sense of the drama of this extraordinary text. [You can find a video of this performance — in the King James Version — here.](#) Alec McCowen gives a delicious introduction, recorded in front of a live audience in 1990. The performance proper begins at 4.13

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Season: Ordinary time

Themes: Justice