

The Third Sunday after the Epiphany, 22nd January 2012 - Living the Vision Part 1

Reading: Mark 1: 14-20

“St Luke’s is a supportive faith community whose Christ-centred vision lights the way for young and old everywhere, by living out the Gospel.”

Hopefully most of us recognise those words. They’re printed on your newsletter and appear in every official publication we produce, and that’s been a deliberate policy for the past four years as an attempt to keep our vision statement in front of us. These few words, this single sentence, sums up the more than two years of work that went into stating who and what we believe we are called to be in this place.

2012 is going to be a year of change, and yes I know it won’t be the first. In our diocese, in our region and in our immediate district some changes have already happened and more are still to come. Our parish too will face some changes this year, and as we face those changes we will need to be clear about keeping our vision in front of us, and we will need to refer back to it from time to time to make sure it still holds true to us and that we are continuing to hold true to it.

And we will need to wrestle with the question, “how do we get there?” We’ve actually been wrestling with that for a while. Over the past couple of years there’s been lots of talk and study focused on how we might ‘live the vision’ and we’ve not yet really reached an answer. So I want to invite us to go back, to look again at our vision, to let its words sink back into us, and to reflect on what they mean. This isn’t going to be a one-sermon thing, we could be here all day, but I do want to make a start. So today I want to begin at the end - which is really the beginning – and ask what it means to “live out the gospel”.

It’s a good place to start, especially today; because the beginning of living out the gospel is really what today’s reading from the Gospel of Mark is all about. This is the Year of Mark and if we’re going to engage with this book we really need to pause and spend some time right here. Mark is, as we know, the earliest and the shortest of all four gospels. It has no Christmas story, but instead begins with John and the baptism of Jesus, following which Jesus goes immediately into the wilderness, only to emerge today, just a verse or two later, following John’s arrest as he comes to Galilee “proclaiming the good news of God”.

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

These are the first words Jesus says in Mark’s gospel and with them he sums up his entire ministry, so if we want to understand Jesus in Mark, and what it means to live out the gospel in this context, here’s where we start.

“The time is fulfilled” - each gospel writer goes to great lengths to place Jesus within the salvation history of Israel. ‘This is the time we’ve been waiting for’ they say, ‘this is it.’ “And the kingdom of God has come near”. We’ve spent lots of time before on this ‘kingdom of God’. In Matthew and Luke, in the Sermon on the Mount and the sermon on the plain, Jesus goes to great lengths to describe and explain what this kingdom is all about, but in Mark we don’t get any of those stories. Here if you want to understand the kingdom you need to watch how Jesus lives it, and in doing so it begins to be clear that this isn’t some

magical place far away or after death. The Kingdom of God as Jesus lives it is in the here and now and it's not so much a place as a state of being, a way things are rather than a place we might visit or even travel to and stay. God's way of being has come near, and that nearness demands a response.

"Repent, and believe in the good news." In Mark Jesus echoes John in his call to repentance and as I've said before we need to recognise this is a loaded word. 'Repent' reminds us of street preachers with signs telling us how awful we are, or strict moral codes that have more to do with inherited Victorian ethics than the gospel, so if we're going to use this word we have to unpack it, and to do that we go back to the Greek.

'Metanoia' - to shift one's mind, or more accurately to change one's perspective, so things are seen and understood differently – that's what it means to repent in the gospels, but we have to see that meaning in its overall context. In the gospels in general and Mark in particular when Jesus calls people to repent that requires two things: first, a changed perspective. We no longer see the world the way we used to do it, and second a change of actions. When Jesus calls people to change the way they see and understand the world he expects that change to include what they do and how they interact with the world now seen differently. There is nowhere in the gospels where we find repentance as something passive. Actions speak louder than words, as the old saying goes, and to repent is to change both inwardly and outwardly.

The other thing we need to recognise about Jesus' call to repentance, and this is especially true in Mark, is that he means now. It's no coincidence I believe that these first words of Jesus are followed by the calling of the first disciples. "Follow me," says Jesus, and they do – immediately. This call to follow is, in a very real way, a call to repentance, and the response is immediate and clear. I repent, I see the world in new ways, and immediately I change my actions to match my new perspective.

"And believe in the good news". We can break down and quantify what Jesus actually preached as much as we like, but the rest of the New Testament is very clear – the good news is Christ himself and all he embodies. A Christ-follower – a Christian – believes in Christ, and specifically believes in Christ in Jesus. As far as what that means for living out the gospel I believe strongly that without Jesus we are just another social service agency or whatever, and while there's nothing wrong with that, it's not what we're called to be and it's not what we say we are. So we believe in Jesus, but what does that really mean?

I am convinced that we need to get away from the idea that believing and certainty are somehow the same thing. Whatever else believing in the good news might have meant to Jesus, it's clear that it wasn't just an intellectual exercise. Jesus makes this sentence right up front in Mark's gospel but he doesn't go on to explain what it means. Instead he goes on to live what it means. If we want to see what Jesus meant by believing in the good news we need to look to what comes next. Jesus heals the sick, he gives food to the hungry, he meets people's real needs and he does much more than he says. This call to belief isn't, then, some intellectual demand for agreement. There's nothing terribly philosophical or theoretical about the way Jesus enacts his belief in Mark, although there is something inherently theological in what those actions tell us about God.

"Repent and believe". As we look at our Parish Vision Statement, as we ask ourselves what it really means to live out the Gospel, we must look to these words. We must see in them a call to repentance, to a shift of perspective that leads immediately to a change in practice. To live out the the gospel as we find it in Mark is to live in this new perspective, to live as though the kingdom of God, this divine state of being, is present and real among us, and to call others, to invite others, to do the same. We could stand on a corner and preach. We could set up camp on the church lawn or in the middle of the Village roundabout and hold up signs, but the belief Jesus modeled and called people to doesn't work like that. That belief is active, caring, present in what we do and how we live for one another, much more than in what we say or what we sign up to.

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So may we begin and may we continue to live that gospel out, so that no matter what changes may come or challenges may arise, we know who we are called to be and continue to strive to become what we say we are. Thanks be to God.