

Sunday 21st January, 2018 - Epiphany 3
Year B
Jonah 3:1-10
Psalm 62:5-12
1 Corinthians 7:29-31
Mark 1:14-20

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

I suspect that you are all familiar with those simple optical illusions; black and white pictures that, depending on how you look at them, might appear to be either a young woman or an old lady; or do you see two faces looking at each other, or a vase, the shape of which is formed by the space in between the two faces? They are both there, but it depends on how you look at them as to which you see. It's a matter of perspective.

There is a sense, I think, in which our Christian faith depends a bit on our perspective, also - how do we see it; what do we expect of our faith; or perhaps more pointedly, what do we expect of this God whom we follow...

You see, there are some people in this world who think that the call to follow Jesus is a call to commit yourself to something that is *utterly irrelevant* to life as it's lived in the modern world. Actually, you might be interested to know that I'm one of those people, because I think that's exactly what it is.

If you want to be one of the somebodies in the modern world, do **not** follow Jesus. If your first priority is to be relevant, successful, respected and influential, you'd best give Jesus a very wide berth.

As we've just heard in the gospel reading, when you condense the message of Jesus's preaching down to a sentence it is this: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe the good news." And then he continues... "if you want to see what that means, follow me."

So right here at the beginning of his preaching ministry, Jesus is quite up front about the fact that he is not saying, “Follow me and I’ll show you how to be relevant and successful in modern society and to get out of life all the things you’ve always aspired to.” He’s saying “Repent” which means quite literally “Turn around, turn your back on the life you were pursuing and go another way completely.”

And why? Because the time is up and the dominion of God has come near. That is to say the realm of God - that elusive notion of God’s Kingdom and reign - has, in Jesus, come near enough to us that it’s possible to, if you like, change sides; to jump across from the life we’ve known to a life largely unknown. “And this,” says Jesus, “is good news to believe in.”

But is it? Really?? What’s so good about it, we might ask? The beginning of the reading says that John the Baptist has just been arrested and Jesus has already identified himself with John’s activity. And we know that not only does John get beheaded, but by the end of the story Jesus is also arrested and put to death. So this supposed good news is not looking too promising. What’s so good about it, then, that we’d consider turning our backs on all that this life promises to jump on such a dangerous looking bandwagon?

It is important for us to ask these questions from time to time because even though we might have made that decision at some point already, (after all, we are here today for some reason, aren’t we), often we get to another stage of life where the issues look different and we need to ask ourselves afresh whether this is still a decision we want to live by, whether the news still looks good enough to justify the leap.

So we need to pause today and consider again why it is that we have crossed over. What’s so good about the news Jesus proclaims that we would choose to immerse ourselves in his life and turn our backs on everything that seems relevant and promising in the life of the modern world?

Well this is the point at which the answers to these questions all depend on your perspective, and your expectations and experiences of life. Let's be honest here. If the world is at this point fulfilling all its promises for you and all your deepest hopes and dreams are being fulfilled; if you're finding that the TV commercials portray life exactly as you experience it - that you really *can* have it all - that everything is attainable and that each new acquisition, experience or affiliation really does make life richer and deeper and more meaningful, then there is probably no point opting out of that. The message of Jesus will probably not be good news for you.

If you're finding that the singular pursuit of pleasure and excitement and the corresponding avoidance of all pain or discomfort are actually realising for you lasting joy and freedom and integrity without causing any undesirable side effects, then you'd best stick with it. The message of Jesus will not be good news for you.

But if that's not your perspective - if that's not your experience of life, then perhaps you could do with some good news. Maybe the news that the reign of God has come close enough that you can jump across is good news after all.

Now it would be foolish for me to stand here and pretend that it's all that simple and straightforward, and to make out that having once made that choice, life is always going to be just grand. Sure, every now and again things will be completely clear cut and the reasons for the choice we made will be obvious to us and easy to celebrate.

But as I'm sure you well know, nine times out of ten it feels more like giving up some pretty good things to risk everything on something we don't fully comprehend, and that we can only *hope* will be better. And quite often it doesn't even feel like it's paid off, especially in the short term.

But as was clearly the case for Simon and Andrew and James and John in the story we heard read, once you've actually met Jesus, no matter how much of a long shot it might seem, that call to take the plunge becomes nigh on irresistible.

For me, and I imagine for some of you too, the reason is that despite all the discomfort and tension of living a life at odds with the dominant culture that surrounds me, there is an irresistibility about every taste of the living Christ that keeps me, at least, coming back for more.

I certainly can't explain it in a logical, coherent manner, and I suspect that many of you share that issue - what is it about this call to obedience and faith and discipline that grabs you - that has dug its claws into you and brought you to this point in your life. Perhaps it is something to do with integrity - perhaps it has to do with no longer denying that most essential part of our human nature that actually craves the love and relationship with someone greater than ourselves. Maybe it is that liberating feeling that you don't have to try and measure up; that there is nothing worth any more than the freedom and grace that God offers.

Whatever it is, let me offer you this simple encouragement. Even when the road is toughest and the pain of separation from the old ways of life are most acute, the side effects of this struggle are worth it - a step by step growth in integrity, in resilience, and in an ability to let go and simply love. And that beats the hell out of the side effects of most of the dreams I've seen people chasing.

Let go, then - surrender yourself to God's call. Do what the first disciples chose to do - do what Jonah eventually did, and follow - after all, what have you got to gain?????

In the name of God. Amen.