

Last Sunday we heard the story from John's gospel of Jesus recruiting his first four disciples. This week we hear the same story from Mark's gospel - of Jesus recruiting his first four disciples. And yet the two stories could not be more different. John gives us a wonderful dialogue of interest and invitation, in which Jesus entices two of John the Baptist's followers to 'come and see', to spend time with him, and then banter with the reluctant Nathanael to draw him in too. In Mark's account the same two – Simon and Andrew – are simply summoned from their nets, as are James and John. No build up, no explanation. Just a bemused Zebedee, left in his boat to manage the family fishing business without his two sons.

This is Mark's characteristic style. His narrative moves at a pace, as Jesus criss-crosses the Galilee region, recruiting, teaching, healing – and quickly gaining a reputation. The Greek word translated 'at once' occurs twice in our passage and 27 times in Mark's gospel. We've heard this week about President Biden's first 100 days, a crucial period in which a new leader can maximise their early support to push through a legislative programme or the realignment of a business. Jesus shows the same sense of urgency, and no wonder. His message is world changing: 'The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!'

The lack of explanation in Mark's narrative may leave us dissatisfied. We want to know what made those men leave their livelihoods and their homes. Had they actually been disciples of John the Baptist, as John's gospel suggests? Had they met Jesus before, heard him teach, talked about him – so that his summons was the logical conclusion to a gradual sense of call? We don't know.

And that leaves open the possibility that this is, indeed, how Jesus calls: without all the facts, without really knowing what Jesus is up to or where exactly he's going, or why he wants us to follow him. Jesus says, "Follow me," and that's enough. Jesus says, "Follow me," and we do.

Or we don't. We are responsible people, we say. We must make our decisions carefully, we say, weigh our options. Our decisions take research; our values need clarification. We can't just rush into things. We can't afford to change the direction of our lives merely on the basis of a vague proposal, even if it is from Jesus.

Discerning the call to follow can be tricky because we are trying to discern when Jesus is calling us to come away from the specifics of our lives in order to follow, and when Jesus is calling us because of the specifics of our lives, that is, because we have the job we have, because we are who we are. Jesus told those fishermen, “I will make you fish for people.” He didn’t say, “I really need accountants, but you’ll have to do.” In today’s jargon, they had transferable skills. It may be that he’s saying to you, “I really need you to follow me in your job, or in your retirement.” “I really need you to follow me in your marriage.” “I really need you to follow me when you’re with your friends.” “I really need you to use your talents to help in my kingdom, to help in my church, to help in my world.”

Today’s gospel story is about a decisive moment in the lives of four fishermen, when Jesus called them to follow and they said yes. But even after they said yes, they had to keep listening. Jesus kept calling them to the next thing, the next way for them to follow. It’s the same with us: we are called again and again to follow, to put aside what’s occupying us, and be about Jesus’ business instead.

Fortunately, God gives us plenty of help: the Bible to teach and guide us, our church community to accompany and reassure us, the sacraments to nourish us, Jesus’ promise that when two or three are gathered together, he is there in the midst of us.

When Jesus called those first four fishermen, they didn’t make demands and they didn’t ask for guarantees, they just left their nets and followed. But later in the gospel, when maybe they were rethinking their decision, Jesus gives them a promise. When Simon Peter says to Jesus, “Look, we have left everything and followed you.” Jesus responds, “Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age...—and in the age to come eternal life” (Mark 10:28-30).

All these things make our willingness to follow not just about risk, but about promise as well.

Today Jesus says to each of us, “Follow me.” What do you say?