

# Third Sunday After the Epiphany

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## Introduction

Into the ferment of political unrest steps Jesus the preacher, and yet he does so in a strange way. And in a way that must have frustrated and perplexed those looking for the violent overthrow of a despot. Instead of leading a protest revolt against the actions of Herod Antipas, Jesus preaches Good News that a new Kingdom was here and he begins its introduction through the gentle but still subversive call to “Follow me!”

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## Text

Mark 1:14–20

After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. “The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!”

As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will send you out to fish for people.” At once they left their nets and followed him.

When he had gone a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets. Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.

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## Comment

Today’s reading opens in an explosive way. There has been the political arrest of a wildly popular fire and brimstone preacher who has quite openly criticised the behaviour of Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee. Antipas was a complicated man who seems to have been torn between different motivations. We’re told he enjoyed listening to the preaching of John, though he was nervous of the possible implications of what he was saying. His wife, though, was unequivocal in her antipathy to the Baptist.

Herod Antipas's dilemma was real. He knew that if he allowed John to continue his subversive preaching it would most likely lead to a rebellion. But if he arrested him, and then executed him, his murder might incite a rebellion. In the end, the hard world of realpolitik won out and Herod had John arrested. At this stage in the story, we don't know what happens to John, but we might imagine the kind of shock and anger in the region over what we might call today a blatant abuse of power. Some activists I'm sure, were calling for an immediate uprising.

Jesus moves up into Galilee some time after his baptism by John in the Jordan. Matthew's gospel seems to present this as a retreat. Jesus has publicly identified with John through baptism, and now the Baptist has been arrested. But Mark's Jesus is not so retiring. He links Jesus' move to Galilee to begin his preaching ministry directly to the arrest of John. Is this how the revolution begins? Is this how the Kingdom is finally made manifest on earth?

The message of Jesus carries on exactly where John's left off. He speaks with urgency and insistence, that the Kingdom of God is now here. This message was not unfamiliar to the people. The long held hope that God would be proclaimed the true King over against violent tyrants like Herod, was a common theme in Hebrew literature (Psa 10:16; 103:19), but here was someone daring to proclaim, in the face of political violence, that the era long-hoped-for had now come. This was Good News indeed for those oppressed by the military and political powers. The call to repent then, was a call to decision, either to fear the earthly king or change your mind in favour of a new Sovereign.

Mark has set up the story nicely, courageous public preaching, craven politically motivated brutality, and a voice that refuses to be cowed.

So what's the next step? What will be the spark to light the revolution? Does Jesus recruit dissidents to face down the soldiers of Herod? Does he coordinate protests at the prison where John is held?

Frustratingly, it's none of the above. This powder keg of unrest shifts dramatically, and we see Jesus wandering by the lake, spending some time watching fishermen at work. Mark has led us to the cliff edge of violent resistance and then stepped us back. This sudden check in the hurtling pace of the narrative should no doubt give us pause.

What we get is an authentic call of Christian discipleship and the root of true revolution which comes in the form of a moment of decision. "Repent and believe" coalesces in the simple "Follow me." Perhaps Peter and Andrew were ready for this call because they too had been caught up in the political ferment. Perhaps they were ready for the overthrow of Herod and his cronies, and the ushering in of the reign of God. We don't know for sure, but what we do know is that the call of Jesus comes in a form deeply familiar to his hearers.

In Amos the prophet warns that a time is coming when an apostate nation will be taken away with fishhooks in their jaws (Amo 4:2), and Jeremiah warns that many fishermen are coming to catch the people because of their wickedness (Jer 16:16). Tellingly, Habakkuk says God has made the people like fish without a ruler and a wicked foe will pull them up with hooks or catch them in their nets with glee (Hab 1:14-15).

Some leaders will drag you, violently and forcefully in their wake, and even rejoice at the pain caused. Jesus simply issues an invitation to a choice. The way of violence may help the revolution come quicker than it would otherwise happen, but the gentle call in the middle of a day's work promises something like the same outcome: new leadership, but achieved without the coercion. It doesn't mean that violence will not be involved, and we know it comes in the story eventually. But the challenge here is to fish without nets or hooks, simply with the enticing power of Good News.

The Good News proclaims that the reign of God is just and true and that violent and oppressive regimes have had their moment. Just like in Peter and Andrew's day though, believing and acting on the Good News that God's reign is here requires a great deal of faith. It's not always clear or evident that the loud voices of coercive power have been overcome. But the world needs individuals and communities committed to another form of order, that begins with a simple response to the invitation, "Follow me."

## Response

Today or tomorrow or some day soon, there will be a choice. To respond with aggression, or violent words, to repay violence with violence, or else to hear the words of Jesus to follow him along a more complex and difficult path. To interrupt the cycle of violence, perhaps even to absorb violence into oneself. Begin today with hearing again the words of Jesus by that lake. "Follow me." Dare to interrupt a downward spiral of conflict by going for a walk, or by engaging in the stuff of everyday in anticipation of hearing that call again.

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## Prayer

God of courage and of peace,  
In Jesus you gently but insistently call us  
in the middle of our everyday  
    to walk a way of peace  
    to eschew violence  
in our thoughts, words and actions.

Grant us your courage today  
through the strong and merciful  
    presence of your Holy Spirit  
To stand firm against the headwinds of aggression  
And to be true disciples of Jesus  
And faithful emissary's of the Good News  
Amen