

“PICKING THE TEAM (Mark 10)”

Mark 3:7-19

Mark's story of the life of Jesus continues. We're still very much in the early stages of the story, but already we have seen something of what the ministry of Jesus is like. He has come into the region of Galilee, proclaiming a radical message, a message of hope and forgiveness and transformation. He has come to tell an expectant people that the things which their prophets had announced are now beginning to happen. The new "Kingdom" of God is starting to appear, the rule of God, his sovereignty over the affairs of men and women, is now being given tangible shape as those with diseases and demons are freed from their grip, as the guilt and regret that have kept them boxed in are done away with, as the exciting possibilities of life lived to the full are demonstrated. It calls for a new way of looking at the world, a new approach to life and to God. It requires a way of thinking that is freed from the need for rules and regulations. But it is a prospect that is attractive enough for Simon and Andrew to walk away from their nets and their routine, a call that comes with an authority so intense that Levi can stride out of his tax collectors booth and into a new life with Jesus.

Of course, such a message attracts opposition. There are powerful vested interests at work in the community which see any new ideas as challenges to be resisted. We have encountered the Teachers of the Law, the guardians of the religious and legal traditions of the Jewish people, who insist that everything is done strictly according to the letter of the Law of Moses, and specifically according to their interpretation of it. We have met the Pharisees, whose devotion to keeping the Law themselves is second to none and who therefore regard their policing of the Law as of great benefit to the community. These people want no truck with a man who comes declaring that there's no point keeping the Law if you've forgotten why you're keeping it – which is exactly what these people have done. Such is their dislike of Jesus by now that they really want him done away with. He is unsettling the people with his avant-garde ideas and his encouragement for people to think for themselves. So they enter into a pact with the hated Herodians, the supporters of the puppet ruler of Palestine who is kept in place by the Romans, the uncircumcised atheists who are occupying their country. That's where we'd got to last time we looked at this story together.

But despite this focused opposition, Jesus' popularity grows. The Pharisees and religious leaders might not be able to understand the thrust of Jesus' message (or, if they do understand, they find it so subversive that they cannot stomach it), but the ordinary people cannot get enough of it, especially as it is accompanied by all kinds of apparently miraculous activity. And the crowds flock to see and hear him. Now, these are not necessarily all people who are eager to become his followers: they come along for a variety of reasons – curiosity, defiance, healing, the herd instinct – but they go away with a clear idea of what Jesus is all about. And they come from all over the place. In v8, Mark mentions the various parts of Palestine that they have travelled from. Word has obviously got about and, if you have a Bible with a section of maps at the back, you'll see just how wide was Jesus' audience profile. We are not talking about some isolated group here.

Many of them had obviously come for healing. They may not have had any interest in what Jesus was saying – just so long as their leprosy was cured or their twisted limbs straightened, they were quite happy. And, it appears, Jesus was happy to help. There's no record here of Jesus imposing any conditions on them. He doesn't ask for payment. He doesn't insist that they join his group. He doesn't present them with a list of things they've got to believe before he can heal them. And he continues casting out demons, too. Some of these people are obviously demonically possessed and as the evil spirits are ejected from the seekers, they cry out, "*You are the Son of God*".

Of course, there's the great irony that Mark is emphasising here. The religious leaders, those who believe that they are closest to God, cannot recognise Jesus for who he is. Their eyes are clouded by prejudice. Their minds are imprisoned behind the bars of their own dogma. Their theology is of their own making.

They cannot possibly countenance the appearance of the Messiah, the Christ, the appointed and anointed Son of God in human form in their neighbourhood. But the demons, the agents of Satan, the evil spirits who wreak so much havoc in the lives of unfortunate men and women – they recognise and acknowledge Jesus. Episodes like this scare me when I stop to think about them. Not because I'm scared of the demonic, but because I'm scared I might not recognise Jesus if he turned up here, if his Spirit started doing things in this place that didn't quite fit in with my conservative, evangelical, Pharisaical theology. Would you?

Strangely, according to Mark, Jesus swears them to secrecy. He doesn't want them telling people who he is. It's something that Mark mentions quite often in his story of Jesus – the “Messianic Secret”, as some scholars call it. Why does he do this? There are all kinds of theories and suggestions about this, and the short answer is obviously, we don't know. Was it perhaps because it wasn't yet the right time for Jesus' true identity to be widely proclaimed? Was it perhaps because the announcement of the arrival of the Son of God was not really best made through the medium of evil spirits? Was it because Jesus was still wanting people's attention to be drawn to the message of the Kingdom of God rather than to his own person? (If you have any ideas, why not take them along to Alan Dempster's home group this week?)

Whatever the reason, Jesus seems content to continue with his ministry of preaching and healing. But he does start to take a few precautions here. Firstly, he attempts withdrawal. He tries – unsuccessfully – to get away from the crowds. Maybe this was just his own personal need for time and space on his own. There are many recorded instances of his going into lonely places to rest and to pray. The crowds follow him, though, and he ends up on the beach again. (Presumably he didn't have a little banner, some puppets and beach games, and a small group of earnest students helping him in this beach mission!) But he did arrange with some of his new-found friends to have a small boat at hand. Possibly this was in case he needed to make a quick getaway, or in case he needed a platform for his preaching.

The other thing he does is to select some people to help him in his ministry – he picks his team, as it were. Jesus goes up on to the mountain, which for the Jewish people was a powerful symbol of religious experience. Have a look through the Old Testament some time and notice how many significant things happen on mountains. And then, somehow, he calls his followers to him. I suspect there was quite a large group – in other places in the gospels we read of groups of one hundred and twenty, and seventy. Out of this group “*he appointed twelve – designating them apostles*”. Now there are only two mentions of this word in Mark's gospel – only one according to some manuscripts which don't have the word here. It's a special word for Mark. In Greek the word translated “apostle” means “one who is sent out”, but there is clearly a more restricted meaning here. These are special men, as we shall see as we read on through Mark's gospel. But they nonetheless have something to say to us as followers of Jesus today.

Before we look at why Jesus selected these particular people, let's just note a couple of things about them. Much of the time over the past week of half-term holiday, Erik has been closeted away with the computer and a CD-ROM entitled *Championship Manager*. As far as I can tell, it's a kind of simulation game in which you are the manager of a Premiership football club and you have to manage the team through a season of fixtures in the Premiership, various cup competitions and European matches. There's all sorts of information and news that appears on the screen and you have a budget to spend on buying new players. Now, you're not going to waste your money on unknowns or on players with poor records. You go for the best – the tried and tested, the skilful, the fit.

Is that what Jesus does here? Apparently not. Not one of these twelve people is a qualified or experienced evangelist, religious leader or known team player. Jesus picks four fishermen, one tax collector (a Quisling), one terrorist (or freedom fighter, depending on how much you agree with him) and six total unknowns, as far as we can make out. Of course, today we'd have employed the services of a management consultant to vet them, wouldn't we? And we might have received the following memo from the *Galilee Human Resources Directorate* (“Your Business Is Our Business”) –

Dear Jesus,

Thank you for submitting resumes of the 12 men you have selected for management positions in your new organisation. All of them have now taken our battery of tests and we have followed up several other lines of enquiry about each of them. Not only have we run the results through our own Microsoft Pickateam program, but we have had each of the candidates interviewed by our psychologist and our professional aptitude consultant.

It is our opinion that most of your nominees are lacking in the background, education and vocational aptitude necessary for the type of enterprise you are undertaking. Indeed, some of them appear to be totally unaware of what they are letting themselves in for. They do not have any concept of team. We would recommend that you continue your search for persons of experience in managerial ability and proven capability elsewhere.

Simon Peter is emotionally unstable and prone to fits of temper. There is also the strong possibility that he might argue with your leadership.

Andrew has absolutely no qualities of leadership.

The two brothers you have selected, **James** and **John** (the sons of Zebedee) place personal interests above company loyalty.

Thomas demonstrates a questioning attitude that could undermine group morale.

Matthew has been blacklisted by the Greater Galilee Business Bureau.

Simon has been involved in a variety of activities against the state and is being closely monitored by the authorities.

James, Philip, Thaddeus and **Bartholomew** can get very edgy in a small boat during storms.

There is one of the candidates, however, who shows great potential. He is a man of ability and resourcefulness, meets people well, has a keen business mind and contacts in high places. He is highly motivated, ambitious and responsible. We would highly recommend **Judas Iscariot** as your controller and right-hand man. All the other profiles are self-explanatory.

We wish you every success in your venture.

Yours etc.

Would you have chosen the twelve Jesus chose? I suspect not. But they were twelve men who would eventually change the world. And Jesus' choice is not the only unorthodox thing here. The fact that he **chose** at all is quite at variance with the usual way in which a Jewish rabbi would gather a group of disciples around him. The main difference is that a rabbi would not call his disciples – he would be sought by them. People would come and ask to join him – and we see some people doing that in the gospel stories, but Jesus always turns them away for some reason or other. Jesus never debates with his followers that way a rabbi would have done. He tells them and they have to listen. Simon tried on one occasion to argue with Jesus, who immediately told him to get behind him and referred to him as “*Satan*”. But, as Edouard Schweitzer writes, “*Above all, the rabbis could never have conceived of a call so radical as to make clear that being with Jesus is more important than all God's commandments.*”

But what does Jesus call them to? What does his call mean for those whom he chooses to be his followers? What does it mean for us when we hear and respond to the voice of Jesus, making itself heard within us through his Holy Spirit? Well, Mark makes it quite explicit here in vv14,15.

1. COMPANIONS

Jesus appointed these men “*that they might be with him*”. This was a relational call. To begin with they were simply to be with him, to live alongside him, to watch and learn from his example. Hugh Anderson, whom we have quoted several times in this series, writes, “*The first thing in discipleship is to be with Jesus.*” That is an awesome privilege. How many people today, when mentoring another in any situation, would invite that person to live with them, to be with them the whole time? Do Sir Alex Ferguson’s squad all live with him? Does your boss have his management team living with him? Does your head teacher invite all the staff into her home on a permanent basis? Probably not. But that’s why Jesus appointed these people.

And that is at the heart of his call to us. First and foremost, as we have said on many previous occasions, we are called to **be** followers of Jesus, rather than to **do** things for Jesus. Living with Jesus for three years had a powerful effect on these people. It transformed them from the bunch of unknowns that we’ve already seen them to be into world-changers. A couple of weeks ago we remarked that Levi left his customs booth when Jesus called him with absolutely no idea of what he was letting himself in for. And he did not immediately become the person Jesus wanted him to be. It took time (and the Holy Spirit, of course). But that change could not have taken place without his being in Jesus’ presence.

Christianity is relational or it is nothing at all. We might have Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic at our fingertips, know the Bible off by heart, have a code of ethics sorted out that will deal with any conceivable situation. We might have read every great work of Christian teaching that has ever been written and be able to tell the stories of every saint and holy man from St Paul to Pope Paul. We might have our creeds and credentials so tightly nailed down that no storm of heresy could ever shift them. But if we don’t want to know Jesus it’s all a waste of time. It doesn’t happen overnight – like any true relationship. If you’ll pardon the analogy, Jesus is not interested in one-night stands – stick your hand up at an evangelistic service and everything in the garden is rosy. You think you’ve got yourself into heaven and you can forget about the rest of the package. The relationship with Jesus is like a marriage: you need to work at it, to grow into it, to be prepared for some ups and downs. But it’s worth it. And if you don’t have that deep desire to get to know him, to be with him; if you don’t recognise and rejoice in the awesome privilege of **being** with him, then you’ll never really enjoy the experience of being a disciple.

2. COMMUNICATION

Being with Jesus was the main thing, the foundational thing. But then he was going “*to send them out to preach*”. As we’ve already said, this is what the Greek word here actually means – those who are sent out. And this is what scares many of us about being disciples: we think we’ve got to be preachers, evangelists. And, to be perfectly frank, most of us just don’t have that ability. However much you are harangued from the pulpit, however many seminars you attend, however many books with titles like *Ten Easy Steps To Being A Great Witness* you might read, you are just not a preacher. I don’t think that’s a reason to feel guilty. Jesus sent these twelve men out to preach, but we don’t read of many of them actually getting up and preaching, do we. Is that because they were failures? Is it because Jesus made the wrong choices? I don’t think so.

Now I’m not trying to soften this verse or to explain it away, but I think what Mark’s on about here is **communicating** the good news about the Kingdom of God. Preaching as we know it – standing up and

holding forth in a fairly stylised way like I try to do each week – is a part of that. But these men were sent out to tell other people in any way that they could about the good news that Jesus can make a difference in people's lives. St Francis, when he sent out his friars into the market places of mediaeval Europe, told them: "*Preach the gospel at all times. If necessary, use words.*"

People who are desperate to **be** with Jesus will show that by their lives. Those who take seriously the message about the Kingdom of God, who have responded to the radical message of God's grace and freedom, will communicate that message just by the way they live their lives. The things that you say and don't say – and the way you say them: the things that you do and don't do – and the way you do them: the attitudes you hold and allow to shape your life – all these things will say something to the people around you about Jesus. Once again, this isn't going to happen overnight. We're still human, still affected by sin, still fallible. And it takes a very long time indeed to get to the point where you're just as God wants you to be. But the way you undertake that journey will say something to others about the Jesus who is with you.

3. COMMISSIONED

But there's more to this than Jesus sending some of his friends out into the world to be nice to people. It's not simply that he says, "Spend some time with me and then go and be happy people in the community." The good news of the Kingdom of God is all about salvation, about renewal and transformation, about freedom and liberty. And as Simon the Freedom-fighter – and any other person who has tried to bring about the liberation of some apparently oppressed group down through the centuries – would have told you, freedom does not come without a fight. Jesus was to find this out as he joined battle with the powers and authorities which held sway in first century Palestine, and as he fought the ultimate battle with evil on the cross of Golgotha. As one commentator wrote, "*The salvation Jesus brings involves the defeat of Satan and his demons.*"

So these apostles were sent out with "*authority to drive out demons.*" They were commissioned by Jesus to get stuck in to the spiritual warfare that has been going on since evil first touched the lives of human beings. The battle against evil is no easy job. It's a tough assignment. But it's one that those who call themselves followers of Jesus are all called to take on. You cannot do that without the authority of Jesus himself. We've seen the need to **be**, and the call to **communicate** for Jesus' disciples. This is now about the imperative to **do** – to confront evil, to face down the works of the Devil. It's about the struggle we have to engage in with the attitudes and ideologies of the world around us, attitudes and ideologies that stand against the values and the standards of the Kingdom of God.

The "*demons*" against which we struggle may well be actual demonic powers, they may well be spiritual forces that have grabbed hold of our lives or the lives of those around us. There are occult forces and evil spirits at work in this world, I believe, and there may be occasions when we are called upon to confront them, praying against them, taking authority over them, literally, in the name of Jesus. But they may also be the forces of idolatry and atheism which drive the lives of so many people, which, if they remain unchecked and unchallenged end up driving our society. We are given authority by Jesus to speak out against them. We are commissioned by him to drive them out of our society. And I'm not just talking about writing to your MP about Christian broadcasting or adoption by gay couples. This is as much about consumerism and covetousness, about warmongering and mounting international debt – powerful signs that the demonic is at work in our world. If you want to be a follower of Jesus, if you feel his call upon your life, then there are going to be consequences in the way you live that life.

These twelve men began a journey with Jesus that was to take them to Jerusalem – and then on to the farthest corners of the known world. They heard his call and responded. They went with him and spent time with him. They let their lives speak of the transforming power of Jesus and demonstrated that the

Kingdom was really here. They accepted his commission and his authority to fight against the powers of darkness. And without them, we would not be here today, I guess. So how will you respond?

(Questions on next page)

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why do you think Jesus might have wanted to keep his true identity secret?
2. What is the difference between a “follower” and an “apostle”? What does that difference look like today?
3. Is “being” enough? What about “doing”?
4. Jesus gave the apostles “*authority to drive out demons*”. Do we – does anyone – have that authority today?
5. Do “demons” still exist/operate today? How can we recognise the demonic?
6. If Jesus knew Judas would betray him, why did he choose him to be an apostle?
7. What have you learned from this passage?