

3rd SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME Year B

In the late 1970's English actor Alec McCowen launched a one-man show, *The Gospel of Mark* – a recitation by heart of the whole of Mark's Gospel. It involved a minimum of stage props: just a small table with a carafe of water in the centre, and two or three chairs. It was heard in theatres on both sides of the Atlantic. It was performed for a group of guests invited to the White House, and on another occasion for an audience of four hundred Anglican bishops.

McCowen later confessed that initially one of his great fears had been that "reciting the Gospel might be a dull exercise" and that he "might have to manufacture energy" as he went along. He soon discovered that the real difficulty was finding the energy to cope with the fast-moving story of Mark's Gospel. In fact, he had to admit, "I was thrilled beyond measure. This was the greatest script I had ever found." It will be excerpts from this "greatest script", the Gospel of Mark, that we shall be listening to on most of the Sundays throughout the coming year.

Today we pick up the story at the start of Jesus' public ministry. John the Baptist has just been arrested: is Mark hinting at what will happen to Jesus? It must have taken courage for Jesus to come back to the very area where John had preached and been apprehended. But he does come, fearlessly, to proclaim "the Good News from God." "The time has come," he says – God's appointed time, the time the prophets foretold, the time all humanity has waited for. And he continues: "The kingdom of God is close at hand" – this kingdom is not a particular territory, but rather it's wherever God reigns. Though we still wait for this kingdom to come in all its fullness – that's why we pray each day "thy kingdom come" – already it is present in Jesus; in him God's power and love have burst into our world. We see those who are sick healed, sinners reconciled, the Good News proclaimed to all.

Having approached us in Jesus, God now awaits our response. "Repent," Jesus cries, "and believe the Good News." He calls us to repent, to have a change of mind and heart, to see things differently, and so to believe, to put all our trust in him.

Today's Gospel gives us not only Jesus' first recorded words in his public ministry but also his first recorded deeds. Walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he sees two young brothers casting their nets into the water and, a little further on, two more fishermen brothers mending their nets after a night at sea. Taking the initiative he invites them, "Follow me and I will make you into fishers of men." And they respond. Maybe they had met him before and were already deeply impressed. In any event they follow him without hesitation, leaving behind nets, boats and father. Their actions are a declaration that there is nothing to compare with being Jesus' disciple; he is worth following, no matter what the cost.

Alec McCowen wrote: "It is impossible to study St Mark carefully and not know.... that something amazing happened in Galilee two thousand years ago." But amazing things are still happening today. Jesus continues to call people as truly as he once called Peter and Andrew, James and John. At our baptism he called us, called us by name, called us to be his disciples. But it was not a once-and-for-all call; it's a call renewed each day, a call renewed today at this Mass. It doesn't mean that Jesus wants to take us out of this world or away from our families, but he knows how easily we can become engrossed in what this world has to offer, how easily we can confuse a kingdom, and even a salvation, of our own making with the incredible blessings that he has to offer.

So he wants us to look again at the direction of our lives and be ready to repent, to make adjustments, even radical ones if necessary. Above all, he wants us to deepen our faith in the Good News, wants us to recognise that the Gospel of Mark, just like the other three Gospels, is the story of a God who cherishes us dearly, and loves us beyond our imagining with a love that will never end.