

## The Good News as told by Mark (6)

# Jesus introduces the kingdom (3)

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### *A kingdom of hope*

After a brief introduction, Mark summarises Jesus' teaching: 'After John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."' (1:14f) Mark 1:16-3:12 tells a number of stories that expand and illustrate this kingdom. So far we have seen that the kingdom of God is marked by:

- Authority as Jesus speaks and acts (1:21-28)
- Compassion as Jesus heals a leper (1:40-45)
- Forgiveness as Jesus forgives a sinner (2:1-12)

As Mark explains the meaning of God's kingdom we see another thread developing in these stories - not one we'll major on in our journey through these passages, but important none the less. As Jesus lays out what life in the coming kingdom is like its implications begin to dawn on the leaders of society - and they do not like the conclusions they come to. These stories show an ever increasing opposition to Jesus, culminating in 3:6 where we read, "The Pharisees went out and began to plot with the party of Herod how they might kill Jesus."

Returning to the unfolding of God's kingdom, the next mark of the kingdom is found in the story of the calling of Levi, otherwise known as Matthew (cf Mt 9:9-13; Lk 5:27-32).

### *Reading: Mark 2:13-17*

Having established Jesus' authority to forgive sin, Mark now portrays Jesus reaching out to outcasts and sinners. Levi's occupation as 'tax collector' was to collect customs dues and tolls on various goods, in his case quite possibly fish. Since they determined what price people must pay, a toll collector might enrich himself by demanding more than the required amount. As long as the toll collector was able to cover the tax revenue promised in his contract with the authorities, he could keep whatever was left for himself. Thus they were unpopular among the people, who suspected them of dishonesty. The story of Levi's call to discipleship repeats a number of features in the earlier story about the call of the fishermen. Like the fishermen, Levi is beside the sea, engaged in his usual occupation. At Jesus' word, Levi drops everything to follow him (14). However, unlike them, there was no going back for Levi.

What about the Pharisees? Who are they? They were orthodox believers of their day, They believed in the inspiration and authority of Scripture, particularly when it said things like, 'Blessed are those who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers.' (Ps 1:1) They were motivated by a desire to keep the Law and maintain purity (holiness) among God's people. They approached sin with an eye to prevention, believing, as many still do, that prevention is better than cure. The upshot was that they kept any they considered 'sinners' at arms length until such people could show that they had changed.

Jesus, on the other hand, takes a more creative approach. Whilst Pharisees required concrete evidence of a changed life before a sinner could be forgiven and accepted back into the fold, Jesus declares that sinners do not need to do anything before they are acceptable to God. Jesus does not condone a sinful lifestyle but he did believe such a lifestyle could be transformed. Pharisees looked down on sinners, Jesus just went looking for them and invited them to dinner, or, as in this case, accepted their invitation. Jesus does not fear being corrupted by sinners - he is not contaminated by association, instead his presence blesses them as he brings them hope.

As Jesus shows us this kingdom of compassion, forgiveness and hope it raises what may be an uncomfortable question: who are we more like - Jesus or the Pharisees? When we look at ourselves we may be forced to acknowledge a predisposition to write off those we think are beyond the pale, believing that God prefers to save only certain types of people. When we divide the world into 'us' and 'them' we are behaving just like the Pharisees. It is one thing to witness to the outcast, it is quite another to accept the outcast as one with us. This is precisely what Jesus did, and by doing so makes it clear that we cannot expect people to accept us if we are not willing to eat with them.

The last verse in our reading also makes it clear that this is not a minor issue. It is not that Levi and the other 'sinners' Jesus draws to himself are an aberration. No, this is the good news lived out and seen in the lives of any willing to follow Jesus, who through compassion and forgiveness find hope that they too may be part of God's kingdom.

Amen.

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Next week: Jesus and the kingdom of joy