

from this point onwards. Mark does not give the famous explanation of the name change which is given by Matthew, in which Peter was called a 'rock' ('petros' in Greek) after he had declared Jesus to be the Messiah (Matt 16:13-20 and Mark 8:27-30).

Many of those chosen to be apostles are not mentioned again in any of the Gospels, and indeed, the lists of the disciples are famously different in each of them (see Matthew 10:1-4 and Luke 6:12-16). I will not list them side by side to try and get a comparison and sort out the age long disputes about how, exactly, these twelve might be defined. The very fact that many of them are not heard of again and something of a mystery is itself intriguing. Perhaps God intended that some of those He chose would do the work He gave them without the 'oxygen of publicity'. We simply do not know a great deal about how the early Christian church grew; we know some stories (from Acts and from a few early documents not in Scripture), but very little. The fact remains that with a vast crowd clamouring around Jesus, He selected as apostles the four disciples He had already chosen and eight others. One of whom, Matthew, is generally reckoned to be the 'Levi' of the previous story (Mark 2:13-27).

The selection of the twelve is a highlight of Jesus ministry, even at this point in Mark's Gospel. It is the only point at which Jesus had a crowd assembled which Mark tells us represented 'all Israel'. Jesus' choice does not tell us things we want to know about the Gospel, but it tells us what He considers we 'need to know' about the Kingdom of God.

Application

Sometimes it is wise for us to remind ourselves that the Gospel of God and the Good News of Jesus Christ is universal. It is God's plan for the entire universe and is applicable to every generation of people whatever their circumstances and whatever the state of the world. In this passage of Scripture we are told by Mark that Jesus began to gain some perspective on His work after the initial overwhelming response from the crowds and the rejection of the Pharisees. He was not going to be distracted from the task of preaching, healing and deliverance, and He set about planning for the future of the Church by selecting the twelve apostles. One simple message comes to us from all this out of the many important features of the passage. We, too, have one Gospel to preach, it has not changed and we should plan for the future according to the Word of God and not our response to the temporal pressures of our day.

This sounds simple, but it is not straightforward. As I write this, the churches of our own day continue to try and find new ways of presenting the Gospel in an age which appears to reject the Gospel more stridently than ever before. There is no doubt that we should actively support every venture which proclaims Jesus Christ as Lord. However, through discernment we should be careful to support that proclamation which is consistent with the Gospel which has been preached by the disciples of Christ throughout two millennia. Be careful. Some people would have us believe that the message must be adapted for our times. It does not. Our methods may change, but the Gospel of Jesus Christ must be adhered to because it is God's plan for our salvation and our eternal future.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. How important is deliverance ministry today, and how does it differ from healing?
2. Read through the list of the apostles and discuss how much is known about each of them.
3. How helpful would it be if we knew more about the truth of who the disciples (apostles) were and what they did, even though this is not in the Gospel?

Discipleship

We are used to talking about all Christians as 'disciples', but there is a hint in this passage that we should also be called 'apostles'. There is a special gift of 'apostleship' mentioned in Ephesians 4:11, but as with other gifts, apostleship reflects something of the calling of all Christians. Try writing down a list of people you believe to be specially called of God, 'sent' by Him to do special things for the Kingdom of God; now write down anything God has 'sent' you to do. There must surely be something which reflects what God has sent you into the world to do?

Final Prayer

The majesty and the power of Your glory O Lord is beyond our comprehension. Yet You continually make Yourself available to us in surprising and helpful ways, showing us Your love and compassion. May we always be alert to Your presence and responsive to Your touch O Lord; AMEN.

Prayer

Today, Lord Jesus, I offer you my worship. It is not the worship born of music or song, or any worship which comes from attending 'church'. It is the worship of my heart, because I know with certainty that You love me, You have saved me, You are with me now, and You will greet me one day in Heaven. This is my purest praise to You, for all You have done, Lord Jesus, AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Missions

Pray for the many different ways in which the church does 'missions' today

- Going to other countries
- Work amongst the poor
- International aid programmes
- Neighbourhood mission
- Mission 'within' the church

Pray that God will bless all the work done in His name, and pray that all may know the power and presence of the Holy Spirit.

Meditation

Jesus, what do You see when You look at Your disciples today?

Do You see people who live as if they have been saved
From a world which is still a troubled place
In which sin remains until the Saviour comes?

Do You see people who are energised by the Gospel
And who have been completely changed
through the incredible grace and love of God?

Do You see people who are motivated to do Your work,
Totally confident in the power of the Holy Spirit
To transform the world through what they do?

Do you see people who are utterly obedient in all things,
Willing to do whatever You may ask of them
At whatever cost, because the Gospel is so important?

Jesus, challenge us to the very core, so we may live for You now.

Bible Study - Mark 3:7-19

⁷ Jesus withdrew with his disciples to the sea, and a large crowd followed him from Galilee; ⁸ for when they heard about everything He was doing, large numbers of people came to Him from Judea, Jerusalem and Idumea, and from beyond the Jordan and the region around Tyre and Sidon. ⁹ He told His disciples to keep a small boat nearby for Him, so that He would not be crushed by the crowd. ¹⁰ He had cured many, which meant that all who had diseases pressed forward to touch him, ¹¹ and whenever the evil spirits saw him, they would fall down in front of him and shout, 'You are the Son of God!' ¹² But he gave them strict orders not to make him known. ¹³ He went up the mountain and summoned those whom he wanted, and they came to him. ¹⁴ He appointed twelve (whom he also named apostles) so that they might be with Him, and He might send them out preaching ¹⁵ and have authority to cast out demons. ¹⁶ He appointed the twelve: Simon, whom He named Peter; ¹⁷ James son of Zebedee and John the brother of James, giving them the name Boanerges, that is, Sons of Thunder; ¹⁸ and Andrew, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus, and Simon the Cananaean, ¹⁹ and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

Review

This reading contains a summary of the early teaching ministry of Jesus together with the story of the selection of the twelve apostles. This passage appears to be easy going, telling a story that is straightforward and with few complications. However, we must be careful, because every verse of scripture is important, and sometimes, we do not see this until we look closely.

To begin with, these two paragraphs form a natural break in the Gospel of Mark. Mark is not generally credited with having much by way of a distinctive structure, for example like Matthew, which has five blocks of teaching interspersed with incidents in Jesus' life, or John in which each of the early chapters has a story followed by a long discussion. Mark's Gospel is very different, because the story flows rapidly from one critical incident in Jesus' life to another until His eventual death (chapter 15). Our reading today comes just after the first major critical incident, in which Jesus was rejected by the Pharisees (see yesterday's reading - 2:23-3:6), and just before their denunciation of Jesus as a demon (as we will see in tomorrow's reading; 3:22). These two passages are the first major crisis in Jesus' ministry which point to His eventual death, and in the midst of this, our passage reads like the calm in the midst of a great storm.

Firstly, Mark says that Jesus 'withdrew' (3:7) with His disciples, to teach a large crowd of people, which was so large, Jesus was forced to consider teaching from a boat (3:9)! Now, earlier, Jesus had seemed to be harassed by crowds of common people (1:35-39, 2:1f. etc.), but with the Pharisees now discussing how to do away with Him (3:6), Jesus returned to them willingly. The reason for this is that they came to hear Him teach and to have their sick healed, and Jesus welcomed this ministry as far more productive for the Kingdom of God than having further contentious debates with the Pharisees (2:6,16,19, 24, 3:2,6)! In all the Gospels, we discover that while Jesus did not take His eyes off His call to go to Jerusalem, he never ignored the needs of the people who came to Him in the crowds, even if they misunderstood Him.

However, not only did Jesus return to teach and minister to the crowds after the rejection by the Pharisees, something else stirred within Jesus' heart. The official leaders of God's people had rejected Him out of hand, and they had rejected Him as God's Messiah. So if the old Israel rejected Him, then the 'new Israel' of God's Kingdom needed to be set up as soon as possible, and the first step was to summon 'up the mountain' (3:13) those people He wanted to appoint as the twelve new leaders of God's new people. The words of the text show explain more of the detail of what Jesus was doing. Firstly, the words 'up the mountain' may mean little more to us than a summons up a hill, but to the Jews, this was an important sign. Moses had gone 'up the mountain' with the elders of Israel to meet God before he was given the 'Law' (Exodus 24:9f.), and the Jewish people associated going 'up the mountain' with pilgrimage to Jerusalem to meet with God in His Temple. Jesus also called His chosen team 'apostles', meaning 'those who are sent' by God for a special task (3:14), and he commissioned them to assist Him in His ministry of preaching and casting out of demons (3:14,15). There were no subtleties in Jesus' message here, the Gospel had to be preached and evil had to be confronted; Mark's Gospel has the great benefit of explaining the heart of Jesus' message simply and directly.

In this 'calm in the midst of a storm', Jesus demonstrated something important about God's Kingdom, which is that its work would not stop despite opposition. He also acted to found the new Israel which would one day become the Church of God.

Going Deeper

These two stories belong together in Mark's Gospel, and they are carefully constructed to reveal a great deal about Jesus' ministry. We can see this from the lists within the passage; firstly, the list of places from which people came to hear Jesus and receive His ministry (3:7,8) and secondly, the list of disciples including nicknames (3:16-19). Many of the other details either confirm what we already know about Jesus' ministry or add fascinating insights.

Jesus withdraws to the seaside

Jesus began His ministry in Galilee and Capernaum, with much happening near the Sea of Galilee. He now returned there, having left the synagogue where He had healed a man on the Sabbath day, to continue His public ministry of preaching and healing. His influence was clearly more extensive, however, because the Pharisees came to observe and challenge Him (2:16,18, 24). The Pharisees were a campaigning party centrally controlled from Jerusalem, and no confrontation with Jesus would have taken place (3:6) without their knowledge. But Jesus was not only known about within Jerusalem. The towns and regions mentioned in verse 8 formed an accurate list of all the places where Jews lived in Jesus' day.

Certainly, there were many Jews around Galilee, but others lived in the region as well. They were people from all around the Roman Empire and they lived in a group of towns called the 'Decapolis' (see Matt 4:25, for example); but Galilee is mentioned here and not the Decapolis. Jerusalem and Judea (the region around and to the south of Jerusalem) are mentioned, along with Idumea. Idumea is what the Bible often calls 'Edom', a region to the south east of the Dead Sea inhabited by the ancestors of Jacob's brother Esau, which was subsumed into Israel in 138BC. Mark next mentions regions 'beyond the Jordan' where there was a sizeable Jewish population, along with 'the region around Tyre and Sidon', two sea ports in the far north west of Israel where again, many Jews lived. Mark does not list any of the central highlands of what we call 'Israel', because these parts were occupied in Jesus' day by people called 'Samaritans'; they were related to Jews, but had developed different traditions of worshipping God and were regarded by orthodox Jews as almost pagan.

So it is that Mark was careful to identify all the regions where Jews lived; but why? Firstly, this showed that Jesus' message had reached the ears of all the Jews of Jesus' day, and it gives the passage all the more weight as a summary of Jesus' ministry. Secondly, this gathering of people representing all the Jews of Jesus' day was symbolic. Shortly, Jesus intended to select the new leaders of God's new people. The presence of so many people suggests that Jesus had all the 'old' Israel to choose from.

Despite the symbolism within this story, there is a touching feel to one part, which comes in verse 9 where Jesus is reported as having asked the disciples to keep a small boat available 'so that He would not be crushed by the crowd'. The description reminds us of Jesus' teaching ministry in Matthew's Gospel where it says 'he got into a small boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach' (Matt 13:2). It was a remarkable scene and one which stuck in the minds of those who were present. Jesus used the lie of the land by the side of the sea as a natural amphitheatre in which to teach. Still, however, the crowds pressed forward, particularly those who were unwell. It is most likely that if we had been present and were ill for whatever reason, we would have joined the throng.

Mark completes the picture of Jesus' preaching and healing ministry by adding the third important element of ministry; deliverance. Amongst the crowds and possibly amongst those who were ill (though Mark does not make clear) were people who had 'evil spirits' (3:11). The spirits within them were unable to prevent themselves shouting out who Jesus was, just as had happened in the synagogue, in the first incident of Jesus' ministry (1:25). Further, Jesus dealt with these spirits in exactly the same way; He commanded them to be quiet (3:12). He wanted people to accept Him as Messiah because of what He did for them and not because a demon shouted it out or because there was gossip about Him.

The selection of the twelve

We have already seen the significance of Jesus' going 'up the mountain' to make His choice of the twelve apostles and their importance as leaders of the new Israel (see above). What then is the significance of the individuals Jesus chose, and what they were called? Mark introduces into this passage the description of these followers of Jesus as 'apostles', instead of 'disciples' (as previously, see 2:15,18,23 etc.).

The word 'disciple' means 'follower' and is used throughout Mark's Gospel, but the word 'apostle' means 'one who is sent', and Mark only uses this term here and in 6:30 where He gathers the twelve together after the beheading of John the Baptist. This way of speaking about those who Jesus chose became customary after the resurrection and Pentecost, and naturally expresses the expectation of the early church that the disciples of Jesus were an essential 'testimony' or 'witness' to Jesus' life and death, and therefore had a specific work to do in spreading the Gospel which Jesus had given them (Matt 28:18f., Acts 1 and 2). It was a unique calling for these men, and we do not know how many of them carried out this calling. At least one, Judas, was unable to fulfil his call because of his suicide after his betrayal of Jesus (Acts 1:18,19), but others such as Simon (Peter), James and John became significant figures in the life of the early church. Later, others such as Paul were 'sent' with the message of the Gospel, and many since have been called by God to be an 'apostle', sent by God into the world with the message of Jesus Christ.

We already know that Jesus had chosen Simon and Andrew, James and John, to be disciples. They appear at the beginning of the list, with Andrew, strangely, coming fourth, instead of second as we might expect from the earlier stories (1:16-20). This may well be because Simon (Peter), James and John came to be regarded as the three pre-eminent apostles. According to Mark, this is the point at which Jesus gave Simon the name 'Peter', and He uses this name