

TURNING POINTS IN LIFE

Isaiah 9. 1-4

1 Corinthians 1. 10-18

Matthew 4. 12-23

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Our gospel passage takes us to the very beginning of our Lord's ministry. Jesus has just been tempted by the devil in the desert. As he returns, he discovers that John the Baptist has been arrested; and Christ now leaves Nazareth so that he can go to Capernaum.

Capernaum, where our Lord was to make his home, was a town of about 1,000 people. Its inhabitants relied on farming and fishing to survive. Capernaum was located on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee. Historically, the region had belonged to the Jewish tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali, the sixth and second sons of Jacob; but in the first century it continued to earn its name as 'Galilee of the Gentiles' (4. 15, quoting Isaiah 9. 1). The area had been conquered by Rome and was ruled by a Roman puppet whom few Jews regarded as authentically Jewish. Herod Antipas was notorious for his brutality and for his intolerance of any who threatened his claims to power. Into this context of danger, darkness and death comes Jesus, proclaiming deliverance, light and life.

Christ's message was identical to that of John the Baptist: 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near' (4. 17; cf. 3. 2). Though the content of the message was the same, the context was very different. John was the forerunner, who prepared the way. Our Lord, on the other hand, was the embodiment of his message. It is in his preaching and in his ministry that light has dawned and the reign of God has come.

Like John, Jesus called people to repent. The Greek verb used for ‘repent’ (*metanoeo*), like its Hebrew equivalent (*shub*), means to ‘turn around’. In biblical thought, repentance involves not merely apology, but change: a change of direction, a change of behaviour, a change of life.

The next two scenes illustrate how dramatically lives can change when Christ appears. In the first scene, Matthew depicts our Lord going out for a stroll by the lake and encountering two brothers, Simon Peter and Andrew, hard at work fishing. ‘Follow me’, he says, ‘and I will make you fish for people.’ This first scene highlights Jesus’s call to a new life’s work. Without comments or questions, Peter and Andrew abandon the tools of their trade and follow him.

In the second scene, Christ sees another set of brothers, James and John, in a boat with Zebedee their father. Our Lord calls them, too. This scene emphasises the invitation to Jesus’s new community. James and John immediately leave both the boat and their father, who is mentioned three times in the passage. Christ’s call takes priority even over family commitments: a startling idea in an era when family connections were a primary source both of identity and of honour, and when the responsibility to care for one’s parents was rooted both in cultural custom and in biblical law.

Our Lord calls his disciples to a new way of life in the reign of God. At its most basic level, discipleship means following Jesus, getting behind him and going wherever he leads. For these first disciples, it was to be a difficult road; and despite their initial obedience to Christ’s call, in the coming days they would often fail to understand and to obey him. In spite of this, our Lord did not give up on them. He continued to call them to repent, to turn around and go back to the place where it all began. He continued to call his disciples to live out the promise and hope that he embodies.

I imagine that most of us can empathise with the unsteady steps taken by the disciples as they sought to follow Jesus. For them, as for us, the road of discipleship is often one that is marked by struggle, give and take, and steps taken both forward and backward. The most important thing, however, is that we have chosen (and still choose) to stay on that road; that we resolve to continue to listen afresh to Christ as he says to us, again and again, 'Follow me'.

I wonder if you have ever heard the story of Steve, the painter who often thinned his paint to make it go further. The time came when the Catholic Church decided to restore one of its biggest buildings on a major property. Steve put in a low bid and got the job. He bought the paint, and, yes, thinned it with turpentine.

Well, Steve was painting away, the job nearly completed, when suddenly there was a clap of thunder. The sky opened, and the rain poured down. It washed the thinned paint off the church. Steve fell from the scaffold, landing among the gravestones. He concluded that this was a judgement from the Almighty.

Steve raised his voice to the heavens, crying, 'Oh, God, forgive me; what should I do?' And from above, a mighty voice roared: 'Repaint! Repaint! And thin no more!'

Following our Lord does not happen in the abstract; it happens in the context, circumstances, and relationships of our lives. Our relationship with Jesus is manifested and experienced in the events of our lives, and in the way we act and interact with other people. You could almost say that each moment we live is a kind of turning point; a point in which we can choose, or not choose, to follow Christ. These turning points are numerous and frequent, and they are supremely important: for each moment represents a potential intersection, if you like, of our lives and the life of our Lord.

As Jesus says, 'Follow me', he calls us not only to change and to turn around; he calls us to look in a different direction, to see with new eyes and to establish new priorities. In discipleship, he calls us to travel on a new road.

These turning points of our lives bring us face to face with Christ, and they come in lots of ways. Sometimes they come as we planned, worked, and hoped for them to come. At other times, these turning points arrive completely unexpectedly and take us by surprise. What they all have in common, however, is our Lord's invitation to follow him.

Each turning point comes with the opportunity for, and the promise of Jesus to refashion our lives. That is what Christ did for Peter, Andrew, James, and John. 'I will *make you...*,' he says to them. And that is what he says and does for us as well. As we follow him in discipleship, our Lord *makes us* more than we currently are; and he *makes us* who we were meant to be. In him, we discover and find our true selves.

As we take a moment to look at ourselves, our relationships and the circumstances of our lives, we do well to ask, 'What turning point do I face today?' 'What is happening?' 'What do I see?' Today is a turning point, a moment when we hear Jesus saying, 'Follow me'. As we decide to choose him and to choose his way, our lives will change and take on a new direction. Not only has Christ said to us, 'Follow me'; he says, 'Follow me; for I have *chosen you.*' The joy of every Christian disciple is to know that we have been personally picked by God.

Amen.