

NNR

2.1.11

10.30 A.M.

THE TIME HAS COME!

MARK 1:14-20; 2 COR 6:1-2

INTRODUCTION

We face an interesting challenge today. To begin with, on this first Sunday of the New Year, we have to find a Bible passage that addresses the situation we find ourselves in personally. The name of the month, January, comes from the Roman god Janus, who was among other things the god of doorways and entrances. Famously, he had two faces, one looking back, and the other looking forward. At the beginning of a New Year we both look back to the past year and forward to the coming one. How might the Bible help us this morning to face our thoughts and feelings as we enter the New Year?

The other issue is, of course, that this is my last but one Sunday as your minister. I retire next weekend. At such a time, and in such a context, we look back over a period of 8 years and forward to an unknown future, both so far as you in the church are concerned, and as I and my family are concerned as well.

I offer to you, then, the words of Mark's Gospel which describe the beginning of Jesus' ministry, and in particular the call, *The time has come, and the kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!* You may remember that last August I went on a four day retreat to prepare myself for retirement. This passage became very precious to me during that time, and for that reason I determined to save up my thoughts about it and share them with you when I came to the point of retiring.

The famous words of Ecclesiastes chapter 3 that we read earlier teach us that *there is a time for everything and a season for every activity under heaven*. So let me suggest, first of all, that this very moment we face in our lives and in the church today is

A TIME FOR LETTING GO THE PAST

As we enter a new year we like to review the one that is past. How was 2010 for you? What was positive about it? Was it a time of success? What good things happened during its course? Especially, was it a year when you grew as a Christian, when your faith in God and your love for him deepened? Was it a year when your commitment to the way of Jesus proved to be exciting and productive? I'm pretty sure that all of us will be able to identify at least a few positive aspects to the year that has just finished.

But our personal review of the past year, if we are honest with ourselves, will also remind us of mistakes made and of hurts caused, of bad choices and painful experiences. None of us is perfect, and there may be a number of things that have happened in the last year that we regret but which we can nevertheless learn from and then, hopefully, move on. And on top of that, there will be personal losses of various kinds for which we were not in any way responsible, but which caused a great deal of sadness and pain.

Similar things can be said about the last eight years when I have been your minister. I know I have not been perfect, and that I have made many mistakes. I can't be good at everything, and I know I have my blind spots. I am glad that this is actually a forgiving and tolerant fellowship where we can have our differences and then move on. I believe that is part of the DNA of this church, and we must thank God that it is so.

But there have also been a lot of positive achievements and developments in the life of the church over the course of my ministry for which we also must thank God. However, my point this morning, and I believe that it arises out of the challenge of Jesus to repent, is that we must learn to let go the past in both its positive and negative aspects alike in order that we may be able to move forward into the new future God has in store for us. Repentance is a double turning – a turning *to*, as well as a turning *from*.

More of that turning *to* in a moment, but first I want to suggest some aspects of the letting go of the past that both you and I must be prepared to accept. When Simon and Andrew and James and John started to follow Jesus they had to let go different things in order to do so. Simon and Andrew left behind their nets, the tools of their trade. There is something in that for me, I think, rather than for you. Retirement doesn't mean that I will stop serving God, but does mean that I will be serving him in a different way. I will have to learn to let go the pastoral ministry and mission that I have been involved with over nearly 40 years in order to .

But for both you and me there is another letting go that we must all accept, and it comes from the experience of James and John and what the Gospel tells us they left behind when they followed Jesus. It says, *they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men*. In short, it was their relationships they had to let go.

Letting go relationships is not the same as denying them or repudiating them. It means accepting that they are changing. James and John were still their father's sons, but they were no longer partners in his fishing business. In a week's time I will no longer be your pastor. We won't be relating on that basis in future. So expect our relationship to change, but not to disappear. I hope we will remain friends, and no doubt we shall be seeing each other around from time to time.

The reason for our becoming willing to let go the past is that, secondly, this moment is

A TIME FOR MOVING ON

The church is on the brink of an interregnum. Consider its possibilities in the light of Jesus words. He tells his hearers that a new time of opportunity has arrived: *The kingdom of heaven is near*. He invites a two-fold response. The first we have already dealt with. It is to let go the past in all its aspects. But such repentance, such letting-go, has two sides to it. It is a turn away from the past in order to embrace a new future.

It's similar to the way we greet the New Year. The making of resolutions every year, even though we know that sooner or later we will fail to keep them, indicates our awareness that this is a time for turning over a new leaf, and our desire to begin again and start afresh.

God gives us such opportunities again and again. The God of surprises is a God of forgiveness and grace. He is not simply the God of the second chance, but the God of many new chances. And that is true not only for us as individuals, but also for the church as well.

So think of the months ahead for this church not as an opportunity to mark time and rest on your laurels, but as a time to move forward. Interregnums can be very creative periods in the life of a church. They could be times for discovering what resources, strengths and gifts you possess that you have not previously been aware of. It may be that in the absence of a minister you may be forced to rely on God more than you once thought. I'm not saying that you did not previously trust God. But the temptation is always there for churches to look to ministers to deliver the goods rather than look to God. (Similar things can be said so far as ministers are concerned, as well!)

There is a future and a hope for this church. Jeremiah's words about God having a plans for his people apply here also. I look forward to hearing how things are progressing both before and after a new minister is eventually appointed.

Now finally I want to suggest that the moment we are at is also

A TIME TO ENTER THE KINGDOM

The time has come, and the kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!

I realise that I have mostly been talking about our responses to the challenges and opportunities God puts in our way and not the reason for it. Well, the reason why we need to listen to Jesus is that through him a new era has dawned in relationships between God and human beings. God is always and everywhere at work, sometimes openly, but often in a hidden way. But God *is* at work, establishing his rule, creating new possibilities, offering new life.

His movement to transform the world and our lives within it was inaugurated by Jesus in his earthly ministry, was definitively established by his death and resurrection, and continues to this day through the work of the Holy Spirit. Which means that the appeal of St Paul to the Corinthians is as valid today as it was 2000 years ago: *Do not receive the grace of God in vain...now is the time of God's favour, now is the day of salvation!*

I do not think I have failed to present the challenge of the gospel to you over the years I have been your minister. Personal commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord lies at the heart of what it means to be a Christian and the basis of all service done in his name, whether that service is expressed in evangelistic fervour or a passion for justice and peace. Without the profession of Jesus as Lord, and the experience of God's life-transforming grace that it expresses, all service done in his name may be doomed to frustration.

CONCLUSION

So I want to finish this morning by re-echoing and re-issuing the Pauline summons, *Do let the grace of God go in vain*. It is possible that you may have been sitting under my ministry for eight years, and under Rowland Cole's ministry before that for however long, and you are still resisting the call of God on your life. While I will be exploring in greater depth next week the summons of Jesus *Follow me!*, that summons is also one we have heard this morning in the Gospel. And it is one to which we must all respond.

Ask yourself, then, what was it that made four tough men, pretty rough diamonds all of them, probably; hard-bitten men, leave everything behind when Jesus asked them to follow him? There must have been something about Jesus to cause them to drop everything and follow him.

There is still something about Jesus. We have all to face up to him, one way or another, one time or another. And what better time than the present to do just that. We stand at the beginning of a new year. The future lies open before us all. Let us renew our faith and trust in him. And if such faith and trust is something you have never experienced, then why not, right now, offer your life to his service. Let go of the past that holds you back so much; move on into a new life; become a citizen of the kingdom of God. I could not put the call and challenge better than the Letter to the Hebrews, puts it: *Let us throw off everything that hinders, and the sin that clings so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith*.

What a challenge for the New Year! What a opportunity for the period of interregnum facing the church those words are. And what a promise they are for you and me as we move forward into the future God has in store for us. Amen