**Jesus appoints twelve assistants** 28/5/23 dkm

Read: Isaiah 6, Mark 3:7-19

Text: Mark 3:7-19

Psalms: 75, 46:7-11, 42:1-5, 134a

Some years ago one of the Beatles famously, or infamously, announced that he was more popular than Jesus Christ; was it John Lennon or Ringo Star? I’m not sure! They are no longer around of course, and their fame has faded, but Jesus has millions of followers still today, two thousand years after he walked by the Sea of Galilee. When Jesus came to Galilee preaching, ‘The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel’, people flocked to hear him, because he taught with authority. His teaching was very different to the political and religious leaders of his day, and especially of our day. The truth and authority of Jesus words continue to ring true, unlike the words of Ringo Star, or whichever one it was who said he was more popular than Jesus. Jesus did not attract people with loud music but with simple acts of love and mercy, and a message of hope, hope and new life through repentance and belief in Him.

Jesus began his ministry in Galilee where the people were filled with wonder and amazement at his words and his works. But before long Jewish religious leaders started questioning Jesus and opposing him. In chapter 2, Mark has them showing up at a house where Jesus healed a cripple and forgave his sin, at another house where Jesus was eating with tax collectors and sinners, and then in the synagogue where he healed a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath. Jesus disagreed with the religiosity of these scribes and Pharisees, which upset them greatly. They ended up plotting to kill Jesus (3:6).

Jesus withdrew with his disciples to the sea (3:7), not because he was afraid of the Pharisees; he knew his hour had not yet come. He knew he must complete the work the Father sent him to do. This included preaching the kingdom of God and healing the sick as signs that he was Messiah; he cast out demons to show his power over Satan. In the end, after just three years, he would go to the cross. With this time frame in mind, and with concern for the ongoing preaching of the gospel, Jesus selected and trained twelve men to assist him, and to carry on his ministry. Our subheadings are: ‘Separation’, ‘Silence evil spirits’, and, ‘Selection of twelve assistants’.

**1. Separation**

Opposition to Jesus was growing, but appreciation of his ministry was growing faster. Recall the crowded house and the man being let down through the roof. No doubt the Capernaum synagogue was also packed when Jesus was giving the lesson. So his withdrawal to the sea was not only to avoid confrontation with Pharisees, but to stop him being crushed by the crowd (3:7, 9). We will shortly have a few world leaders descending on our city and already bullet proof cars, armoured vehicles and hundreds of security men are being deployed. You will not be able to get with a mile of the place where these leaders are meeting.

Jesus was not trying to escape the crowds; Matthew tells us that he saw them as sheep without a shepherd (Mat 9:36); he was just trying stop being crushed. He wanted to heal all who came to him, but above all to preach the kingdom of God. He came up with a clever solution to this problem- he told his disciples to get a small boat ready. From the boat he could preach to people gathered on the shore. Some of his disciples were fishermen so knew where to get hold of such a boat.

Where did this ‘large crowd’ come from? (3:7). The region of Galilee had many fishing villages, and farming villages in the hills. It also had towns like Capernaum, places large enough to have a synagogue. Jesus had been throughout Galilee (1:39), so many Galileans were following him. But people from down in Judea and Jerusalem were also hearing about this amazing preacher and miracle worker, and were making their way to Galilee. Some came from further south, over 150km away in Idumea (3:8). They came from other directions also, from over 100km to the north in Tyre and Sidon, and also in the region across the Jordan River. Not only Jews but also Gentiles were coming (Mat 12:17-21). Some call this the year of popularity.

The Beatles were no doubt popular; screaming young girls pushed their way forward just to touch them- why, I will never know! In the crowd following Jesus, people pushed forward to touch him and be healed (3:10). They thought like this because it was happening! Had not Jesus touched the leper and healed him (1:41). And what about the woman with the bleeding problem- that incident shows the difficulties Jesus faced with crowds following him (5:27,28). But Jesus did not rebuke that woman, or any other people following him, except for those with evil spirits.

**2. Silence to evil spirit**

Jesus was bothered by demon-possessed people following him, not by the people themselves but by the demons or evil spirits calling out, ‘You are the Son of God’. When these poor victims saw Jesus they fell down, or were thrown down before Jesus by the demons, and screamed out, ‘You are the Son of God’ (3:11); previously it was, ‘You are the Holy One of God’ (1:24).

Why was Jesus so disturbed by such behaviour? The words were of course, true, although Jesus called himself the ‘Son of Man’, not the ‘Son of God’. Even being known as ‘Messiah’ led to wrong thinking among the people. ‘Jesus wanted people to find out who he was by listening to his words and watching his deeds’. Besides, being called the Son of God would add to his problems with the Pharisees, especially when it was demons calling him this! His opponents will soon be accusing him of working as an agent of Satan or Beelzebub, so Jesus wanted nothing to do with evil spirits, apart from casting them out. He told these unclean spirits not make him known (3:12). He wanted the person afflicted by them to be free of their evil presence.

We need to be discerning when it comes to people preaching the gospel, and not be joining them if they do not know who Jesus is. Remember what is written in 2Corinthians 6:14f: ‘Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers … for what accord has Christ with Belial’. Jesus separated himself from the Pharisees, and especially from Satan and demons.

**3. Selection of twelve assistants**

It is not clear if Jesus got into the boat he asked to be made ready, although we will soon see him telling a parable from a boat on the sea (4:1). Jesus went up on the mountain and called certain disciples to himself (3:13); Luke tells us that he went up the mountain or hill to pray, and prayed all night (Luke 6:12). It was the next day that he called his disciples and choose twelve from among them (3:14). I have called them ‘assistants’ because this is what they were, although Luke calls them ‘apostles’, meaning ‘sent ones’. Jesus will, in time, send them out to preach, to heal the sick, and to cast out demons in his name (3:14,15). He would firstly have them ‘with Him’ to train them, like apprentices, and then he would endow them with divine power, the same power that he had, to do the mighty works he was doing (3:15).

Who did Jesus choose as his apostles? What sort of men did he choose? Why did he choose only males? Why did he choose twelve? Why did he choose a man he knew would betray him? These are questions that arise from this passage; we will try to answer what we can. Many people, or disciples, were following Jesus at this time, both men and women. ‘Disciple’ means ‘follower’. Some were more committed that others (John 6:66). After a night of prayer Jesus chose only males to be apostles, so clearly this was God’s will, and remains the case with regard to elders in the church.

Why twelve men? We are not told directly, but there is probably a link with the twelve sons of Jacob and the twelve tribes of Israel. The twelve apostles will become the pillars of the new Israel of God, or the church (Gal 5:16, Eph 2:20). The names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb are on the twelve foundations of the holy city coming down out of heaven from God (Rev 21). All of the apostles were equipped by the Holy Spirit to preach the gospel, and some were inspired to write books included in the New Testament.

What sort of men did Jesus choose to be his apostles? Among his first disciples were Peter and his brother Andrew who were fishermen (1:16). John and James, the sons of Zebedee, were also fishermen who left their nets to follow Jesus when he called them. Matthew or Levi was a very different fellow, a man despised by other Jews because he was a tax collector (2:14). We know little about the profession or lives of the others; all were from Galilee except Judas Iscariot or ‘man from Kerioth’, a place in southern Judea.

Peter is named first in all the lists of the apostles (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and Acts). He is the only one whose name was changed by Jesus- from 'Simon' to 'Peter '(Greek) or 'Cephas' (Hebrew). His new name means, ‘piece of rock’. At the beginning he was anything but a rock. He was impetuous and often spoke without thinking. But from the outset, Peter took on the role of spokesman for the group. James and John were fiery young men. Jesus actually gave them the name, ‘Sons of Thunder’ (3:17). On one occasion they wanted Jesus to call down fire from heaven on a village of Samaritans because they did not welcome them. Mark does not pair Andrew with Peter as in the other gospels do (3:16), maybe because of the association of Peter with the writer of this gospel. But he is named in the first four (3:18). Andrew is often seen bringing people to Jesus (John 1:41, 42, 6:8-9, 12:20-22).

Mark simply lists the names of the twelve but the other gospels list them in groups of four. In the second group of four come Phillip, Bartholomew, Matthew, and Thomas. Matthew, otherwise called Levi, was a tax collector. Phillip came from Bethsaida, the same town as Peter and Andrew. When Jesus called him he went and found Nathaniel to tell him about Jesus. Bartholomew, which means ‘son of Tolmai’, is most likely the Nathaniel spoken of by John (John 1:45-49). Jesus referred to him as a man without deceit. He professed faith in Jesus, ‘The Son of God and King of Israel’. Thomas doubted that Jesus was risen but later confessed Jesus as, ‘my Lord and my God’ (John 20:28). In south India there is a strong tradition that the apostle Thomas came to India and established the church there.

In the third group of four are James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Canaanite, elsewhere called Simon the Zealot (3:18, Luke 6:15). This is not James the Lord’s brother, or the James who wrote the Bible book of that name. He is probably the James whose mother Mary went to the tomb of Jesus (Luke 24:10). Among the twelve was this second James, and this second Simon, who apparently belonged to the party of zealots before becoming a disciple and then an apostle. Thaddaeus is probably the same man as, ‘Judas the son of James’ and ‘Judas not Iscariot’ in Luke 6:16 and John 14:22 respectively.

Last in this list of twelve apostles is, ‘Judas Iscariot, who also betrayed him’ (3:19, Luke 6:16). Judas was not a nice fellow. He complained about Mary pouring expensive perfume on Jesus feet. Judas became the treasurer of the group and often helped himself to the funds (John 12:6). Maybe this was why he stayed with the group when he could easily have left. Jesus did not compel anyone to stay (John 6:67). Judas stayed with the twelve, even as his heart was hardened by sin. He allowed Satan to enter his heart, leading him to the despicable and deadly act of betraying his Master.

Why did Jesus choose a man who would betray him? From the outset, Jesus knew that Judas would betray him of course. After a night of prayer he chose these men, including Judas Iscariot. These were the men, all twelve, that the Father gave him (John 17:11). They were men given to him out of the world. The world is full of sinners, some predestined to glory and some to damnation. The twelve were men out of the world. Many a time they failed Jesus- Peter denied him and Thomas doubted- but all were redeemed, apart from Judas.

Jesus did not tell Judas to leave but sat down at the table with him. Judas rejected the grace of Jesus. He chose to deny rather than believe in Jesus. The ‘son of perdition’ was fully responsible for his action and the consequences of that action. Why did Jesus choose Judas? ‘That Scripture might be fulfilled’ said Jesus, referring to Psalm 41:9 (John 13:18, 17:12). Scripture must be fulfilled. It was revealed in the will of God that Jesus be betrayed by one close to him. ‘The shocking tragedy of Judas’ life is proof, not of Jesus' impotence, but of the traitors impenitence! Woe to that man!’

The apostles are no longer in this world, but the church they established is. The church continues to be led by men who are called by God, men from all sorts of backgrounds, men who are weak and foolish in the eyes of the world (1Cor 1:27). We pray that these will be men whose focus is upon Jesus, and men doing his work with all faithfulness and fidelity.