

During this year, we'll be hearing quite a bit from the Gospel according to Mark.

One of the defining characteristics of Mark is its speed. And we have a perfect example of that in our Gospel reading today.

We're in the middle of ch1. Mark puts the rubber to the road in chapter 1 and moves fast.

We heard the first part of chapter 1 two weeks ago, and more today. And it's remarkable what Mark has packed into the first 15 verses of his Gospel.

Mark introduces his Gospel, then tells about John the Baptist, then moves to Jesus' Baptism, then talks about Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, and then sends Jesus out into Galilee proclaiming the Gospel. All of this happens in the span of 15 short verses.

To get to the same place where Mark is after 15 verses, it takes John 35 verses, it takes Matthew 76 verses, and it takes Luke a whopping 183 verses.

So Mark seems to be in a hurry to tell us something. What is it he wants to tell us? You don't have to look very far. Back in v1, Mark prefaced his entire work with the words, "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

Then Mark uses the same term twice in today's gospel reading, at the beginning of Jesus ministry. The good news, the gospel.

Mark says, "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.'"

The words 'gospel' and 'good news' are synonymous. The word 'gospel' comes from the old English, god-spell, or good-spell.

The word "spell" today conjures up the meaning of either a series of letters that make up a word, or a series of words that make up a magical incantation. But spell used to mean something more. Spell was a story, or tale.

To sit for a spell was to sit to hear a story, to hear about what's going on. If a story held your attention it was spellbinding.

Thus the gospel, the good spell, is the good story, the good news. Mark describes his writing as the "Gospel of Jesus Christ"; in other words the Good News of Jesus Christ.

That's what Jesus is talking about. That's the first thing Jesus says in Mark: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

In Mark, the entire gospel is summed up in this statement: "The time has arrived. The kingdom, God's realm is near. So repent, and believe the good news."

There are four important parts to this statement.

1. THE TIME IS FULFILLED—The word for time here is the word for God's time, not the time on your watch. Jesus is telling us that God's time is now. God's time is ripe, and God's time is right. God is active in the world. God works within history. God acts according to his own timetable. And it's now time for God to act in a new way.

2. THE KINGDOM OF GOD HAS COME NEAR—God is not distant. The sovereign creator and king of the universe is not sitting on a distant throne, aloof and uncaring. His kingdom has come near. He comes to us in the person of Jesus Christ. He comes to dwell in our midst to bring new life and healing.

3. REPENT—That's the first response Jesus is calling for. Repent doesn't mean be sorry for your sins. After all, people usually aren't sorry for their sins. They usually sorry about the consequences. Repent doesn't mean, "feel sorry." The call to repentance is a call to CHANGE. The word is *metanoia*, which literally means "to change one's mind." In other words, to repent is to turn around, and to live in a different way. It's not a matter of being sorry. It's a matter of changing your way of life, of turning and taking a new path. Jesus' call to repentance is a call to live in a new way.

4. BELIEVE THE GOOD NEWS—after turning, we're called to believe, we're called to have faith. We're called to live as if what Jesus says is true. We're not called to pay lip service to the Gospel. If what God has done for us really matters to us, then we're called to believe it, and to live like we believe it.

In the New Testament, belief, trust, and faith are all the same word. To believe in the Good News is to place your total trust in Jesus Christ.

There is a fundamental difference between knowing about God and knowing God. This is vitally important. This is a place where people who have grown up as Christians all their lives can get stuck. "I've been baptized. I attend Church. I give money to God." Now all of these are good things, and God works through them. But they are not substitutes for a personal, living relationship with God. They are not substitutes for putting your life in God's hands.

If there is anything crystal clear in Holy Scripture, there is certainly one thing that stands out. The one overriding theme from Genesis 1:1 to Revelation 22:21 is this: God yearns for relationship with us. The overall theme of the whole Bible is God wants to have an intimate relationship with you. God wants you to place your trust in him in the most basic and primary way possible. God asks to be first and foremost in your life

If you don't have that kind of relationship, ask. Go to God in prayer and ask him to come into your life. He promises that he will.

If you used to have that kind of relationship, but don't anymore, ask. God raised Jesus from the dead. He can certainly resurrect your faith as well.

If you have a relationship with God, great. But don't be complacent. Even the best of friends can always draw closer to each other.

It's not knowing about. It's knowing. It's not facts. It's acts. We are called to action. We are called to turn and trust. We are called to repent and believe.

It doesn't matter whether we're pagans who have been worshiping trees all our lives, or whether we've been cradle Episcopalians. Jesus asks the same thing. 'Turn from your old ways of doing things. And trust in the good news, trust in God, trust in Me.'

And it's not a one-time deal. The tense of the verb indicates something continuing. It indicates the act of keeping on. Keep on changing. Keep on believing.

That's what Simon and Andrew had to do. They had to turn from their nets and trust in Jesus. That's what James and John had to do. They made a change in the course of their lives, and they followed Jesus. And then they had to keep making changes. Then they had to keep on believing the rest of their lives.

At times it was tough. They had to deal with Jesus on the Cross. They had to deal with Jesus leaving them behind to do his work. They had to minister for decades based upon the remembrances of a brief, intense time with their master.

At times they succeeded admirably. At times they took wrong turns. And at times they crumbled and had to start all over again. But they kept on. They kept on changing the course of their lives. They kept on trusting in Jesus Christ.

Lifelong Christian or new convert, we are called to do the same.

"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the good news."