

Epiphany 3

*Stop Believing That*

January 22, 2012

Christ the King

Kenner, LA

Text: Mark 1:14-15

I don't think we fully appreciate how upsetting and threatening Jesus was during his earthly ministry. Upsetting, because he challenged the order and structure of first century Judaism. At one time quite literally upsetting, when he turned over the tables of the money changers in the temple. That didn't sit well with the authorities. And threatening because he challenged people's prior allegiances, their long-held beliefs, sometimes their very faith.

Often confrontational and counter-cultural, not at all like the picture of the gentle Jesus or the "pale Galilean" which has been so comfortable the last couple of centuries.

But the trouble began as soon as Jesus took up the Father's mission to save, the moment captured in today's Gospel reading, when Jesus started saying (and these are the very first words of our Lord in the Gospel of Mark, so they set the tone for his whole earthly ministry), "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near, repent, and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:15).

What made that so challenging and threatening? How could such an innocuous-sounding message like that spell trouble?

It's mostly because of that word "repent." We've pretty much come to think that "repentance" means feeling sorry for our sins, like contrition. But repentance is much more active than that. To repent, literally means to do an about-face. To be walking in one direction, stop dead in our tracks, and walk in the opposite direction instead. A masterful author by the name of Frederick Buechner defines it this way: "To

repent is to come to your senses. It is not so much something you do as something that happens. True repentance spends less time looking at the past and saying, 'I'm sorry,' than to the future and saying 'Wow!'"

During this season of Epiphany especially, we watch our Lord inviting people left and right, including us, into the "Wow" which keeps happening around him and because of him. The disciples ask themselves, "Wow! Who can this be that even the wind and the sea obey him?" His listeners ask, "Wow!. Where did he get such authority?"

Jesus explains it this way (again, in today's text): "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near." That's what's happening. Something new, but a long time coming. "The time is fulfilled." He says at one point, "Go and tell what you hear and see, the eyes of the blind are opened, the ears of the deaf unstopped, cripples are healed and the poor have the good news preached to them" In other words, "What do you think is happening?" "The kingdom of God has come near," that's what's going on here.

How should we react? What should we do? What's God asking us, challenging us to do?

Here it comes, it all boils down to this, and it's the most difficult and revolutionary thing of all, "Repent and believe in the good news."

Huh? That doesn't sound so hard. What's the big deal?

OK, this is really important, this is the "take away" from today's sermon, so please listen carefully. When Jesus says, "Repent and believe in the good news," he's saying at the same time, "turn away from all the bad news you've been believing. Stop believing that, and believe the good news I bring instead."

This requires radical conversion, because it normally means that we stop believing what we've been believing, often what we were taught to believe, or what seemed logical to believe, what we thought was the truth. That we do a complete turn around and believe in the good news instead.

It means asking ourselves, “what have I been believing, if not the good news from God? What might I be trusting in, hoping in, placing my faith in, if it’s not the good news?”

Well, the heart of all natural religion and spirituality is that if we do just the right things, God will treat us favorably.

The president of the church I served in Providence, RI gave me a shirt that said, “If you lead a good life, say your prayers and go to church every Sunday, when you die, you’ll go to Vermont.” He had a very nice cabin in Vermont, naturally.

Well, we’d never fall for anything that silly, but. . . hmmm, if I lead a good life, say my prayers and go to church regularly, doesn’t that count for something? What else should we stop believing? Anything which makes us rely on our own righteousness, our own good works, as though we were the ones who determined our status before God and our eternal life. Repent of all that, says our Lord, and believe in the good news.

At a funeral this week, someone said we needed to keep our departed brother in our prayers. The good news is that our deceased brother doesn’t need our prayers. He believed the good news, the Gospel which says that Jesus has redeemed and saved us and gives us the gift of eternal life as a pure gift, through his own suffering death and resurrection. How absurd it would be to believe that there’s anything else we could possibly add to what Jesus has already done. We need to believe the good news, instead.

I can’t let this end without making two very important points. The first is this, that everything we believe which isn’t the good news, the truth as Jesus reveals it, everything we trust in other than the Gospel, is actually bad news when looked at carefully, because it requires more from us spiritually than we’re capable of, like asking the blind to see and the deaf to hear.

The second point is this. Jesus is the good news, in person, the love and mercy of God incarnate. When he said “the time is fulfilled,” he was

announcing that the whole saving history of God finds its fulfillment in him. And he is the one who ushers in the kingdom of God. We're part of that kingdom because of him.

When we believe that good news, then we do what Simon and Andrew and James and John all did at the conclusion of today's Gospel Reading, we simply follow Jesus, wherever he leads us.