Keep it Simple
A sermon by Revd Dr Sam Wells

Readings: Genesis 14.17-20; Revelation 19.6-10; Mark 1.14-20

In 1961 a bunch of engineers in Burbank, California, were working on one of the great challenges of the technological age. It’s a problem we can all relate to: how to harness the sophistication of science in such a way that doesn’t make your product unusable by the ordinary person. The issue for the engineers in California was, they wanted to make a jet plane that was clever enough to spy on the Russians, but was, at the same time, simple enough that an ordinary mechanic could repair it in emergency conditions on the ground. As legend has it, the lead aeronautical engineer at Lockheed, Kelly Johnson, tossed a bunch of tools to his design team, with a single word, ‘Kiss.’ Realising he didn’t have in mind a group embrace or something even more intimate, they said, ‘Whaddya mean, chief?’ He replied, ‘Keep it simple, stupid.’

Kelly Johnson was articulating an ancient rule of thumb. The fourteenth-century Franciscan theologian William of Occam maintained that when exploring philosophical hypotheses, you should always favour the one with the fewest assumptions. The sixteenth-century artist Leonardo da Vinci used to say, ‘Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication.’ The twentieth-century aviator and writer Antoine de Saint-Exupéry claimed that perfection is reached, ‘not when there is nothing left to add, but when there is nothing left to take away.’ And the German architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe coined the expression, ‘Less is more.’

It’s possible they were all reading Mark’s gospel. At the start of Jesus’ ministry, Mark describes what Jesus is about. Really, he couldn’t keep it any simpler. He gives us four verbs, all single word imperatives. I want to look at those four verbs today, to examine what they mean. But first, let’s look at what Jesus says in introducing those four verbs. Let’s look at the very first words Jesus says in the very first gospel to be written. He comes to Galilee, and says, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near.’

We spend our whole lives surrounded by excuses. ‘If my mother hadn’t been possessive,’ ‘if my father hadn’t been depressed,’ ‘if I’d gone to a different school,’ ‘if I hadn’t had that relationship when I was 19,’ ‘if I hadn’t got ill in my twenties,’ ‘if I’d had the good looks my brother had or the brains my sister had,’ ‘if I’d only got that job or been a bit more adventurous that day...’ It’s as if everything in our life is just a few inches away from perfect, but those inches make all the difference. And the two most common names for those inches are time and place. Sometimes we’re all up for it and ready to go, but we’re in a place where no one gets it or we’re weighed down with commitments and responsibilities. Other times we feel we’ve been given gifts and opportunities, but the time just isn’t right.

From his very first words, Jesus blows away our excuses. ‘The time is fulfilled,’ he says. It’s the right time. ‘The kingdom of God has come near’: it’s the right place. Think about a footballer waiting in the tunnel for a World Cup Final. The preparation is over. The moment is now. The time is fulfilled. But the difference is, Jesus has been waiting billions of years for this. Feel your spine tingle. It’s the right time. Don’t blame the weather; don’t say you’ve got a cold. The time is fulfilled. Here we go. At last. ‘The kingdom of God has come near.’ This is it: God is with us; you can reach out and kiss the second person of the Trinity. Imagine standing in a crowd outside Buckingham Palace when the Queen goes walkabout, or in the Vatican when the Pope is touching...
distance away. And then realise it’s the Son of God who’s right in front of you. The kingdom of God has come near. Very near.

Ok, so it’s the right time and the right place. What does Jesus want from us? Four things, it turns out. He keeps it simple. Very simple.

Number one, repent. It’s an unfashionable word. On any list of winning friends and influencing people, starting with a smile always comes top. What you say matters, how you say it matters more, but what you show, and don’t say, matters most of all. ‘Repent’ isn’t on that list anywhere. So why does Jesus say it? For the same reason Alcoholics Anonymous starts its 12-step programme with, ‘Admit that you are powerless and your life has become unmanageable.’ People will go to any lengths to avoid step one. They will spend 20 years in misery as a result of addiction rather than enter a 12-step programme and do something about it. Jesus is saying to Israel, to humanity, to you and me: ‘Admit that you are powerless and your life is unmanageable.’ This isn’t a story about a bunch of people by the Sea of Galilee two thousand years ago. This is about today. This is about now. We’re all powerless, and all of us have lives that are unmanageable. We are all addicts. Because sin is addiction. It’s giving something power over us that ought never to have power over us. It is making something less than God our god. And we all do that. All of us. All the time. And we’re all like the miserable person who’s wandering round for 20 years pretending everything’s normal. And into that meticulously-constructed but ultimately false world, into that fabulously-attired but in fact utterly naked world, into that hugely-bloated but easily-burst balloon of a world comes Jesus, and, like a toddler with a pin or a child seeing the king has no clothes, he simply says, ‘Repent.’ And we have a straight choice: the concatenation of lies or the fresh but chilly air of the truth. He keeps it simple. Very simple.

But what he doesn’t do, in the midst of our exposure, shame, fear and yet our relief at long-delayed honesty – what he doesn’t do, is leave us alone. He has another word. He says, ‘Believe.’ Believe is the other half of repent. Repent means ‘I have failed to save myself.’ Believe means but there is someone who can save me, indeed longs to save me and already has saved me, if I would only accept and receive it. As a child my favourite game was sardines. One person goes and hides and everyone else goes looking for them. When they find them they don’t shout and scream, they quietly fold themselves into the background and wait for others to come and do the same. If you’re one of the last to find everybody you walk into a dark place and quickly become aware of a host of pairs of eyes and smiling faces, glad to see you. It’s like a silent surprise birthday party. That’s what we call coming to believe. You think you’ve been wandering around in the dark, but then you find yourself surrounded by saints and enfolded in a story. You thought you were alone but you find companions who struggle like you do, a place in a drama that’s full of people like you, and a God who in the power of the Spirit is always at your side. Believe. It’s not grabbing a tight hold of a difficult idea; it’s allowing yourself to be cradled by the glory of God. It’s simple.

But it doesn’t stop there. There’s a third word. Follow. There’s a class dimension to this story that’s easy to miss. Jesus calls four people. Andrew and Peter are ‘casting a net into the sea.’ That’s not the most sophisticated form of fishing. There’s no extensive equipment. It’s a bit of a hit and miss operation. James and John are different. They’re part of a family business, because their father Zebedee is mentioned. They have a boat, so it’s a business with significant resources. And the story refers to hired hands, so they have staff, and for all we know they have an HR department and terms and conditions of service and a risk register and arrangements for taking time off in lieu and disputes about holiday entitlement and sick pay. In other words James and John are middle-class businessmen while Peter and Andrew are working-class labourers. The point is that whether you’ve got family responsibilities or staff liabilities, whether you’ve got delicate contracts or longstanding commitments, Jesus calls you regardless. Follow. For Jesus, there’s no believing without following. We’ve created this extraordinary notion that believing is an internal matter, about thoughts, feelings, ideas, and experiences – and hence people say belief is a very personal thing. But Mark’s
gospel knows nothing about such a novel idea. It’s simple: believing means following, and it has a huge economic impact on a person’s livelihood and an enormous social effect on a person’s family. There’s a great emphasis on leadership these days, but the simple truth is, you’re a leader if you have followers. Most of leadership is choosing the right person to follow.

And the final word is, Fish. Fish was a code word in the early church. The Greek word ictus, which means fish, was an acronym for ‘Jesus Christ, son of God and saviour.’ It’s said that in dangerous times, on meeting a stranger, a Christian would draw an upper arc. If the stranger added a lower arc, making a fish, then it would reveal they were a Christian too. But the meaning of this fourth word, fish, is much simpler. The difference between believe and follow is that Jesus is going to make a difference not just to your heart and soul but to your life and circumstances. The difference between follow and fish is that following Jesus isn’t going to affect just your life, but the life of everyone you meet. You want everyone you know to follow too. That doesn’t mean if they don’t follow you force them, manipulate them, impose yourself on them, or show any less respect for them. It doesn’t mean you ever imagine the way to follow Jesus has to be by following you. But it means you never call Jesus ‘my’ God, as if there were a bunch of divinities out there and you can take your pick. You never assume this is just a private matter. The meaning of fish is simple: you want to bring others into the company of Jesus.

Remember Kelly Johnson tossing his aeronautical engineers a bunch of tools in California in 1961. Think about his one-word motto. KISS. Keep it simple, stupid. And then think of the dawn of our salvation in Galilee, and about this moment right now. This is the right place and the right time. Repent. Believe. Follow. Fish. Because Christ, in the power of the Spirit, is among us to kiss humankind. And Christ the mechanic has to find a way to save the world that can be adapted to conditions on the ground. And all he has, with which to repair the world, is a bunch of tools. And that bunch of tools is you.