

I'm sure like many of you, the story which Jesus told of the prodigal son is one that sticks in your mind. It's the story which tells us about our Father God's heart for people like you and me; people who often run away from God, people who become distracted with other things of this world, and then realise the incredible love and purpose that he has for us, with arms fully open. Here's a son who comes and demands that his father will simply give him what HE wants, and his Father with a heart broken doesn't reject his son. The son runs away from all that his Father plans for him. This son tries to live his life to the full because he has all this money, but soon it's all gone. And so he comes to this reckoning moment, realising what he has done, and he chooses to run back to his Father and he rehearses the speech he is going to give to his dad. But as he approaches he sees his Father running towards him, with eyes welled full of tears of love. And before his son can really say too much, he shhh's his son, reaches into his pocket and pulls out a signet ring. It's a ring that has the marking of his family on it. It's a ring that promises him belonging. He places the ring on his finger and says, "Welcome home my son". This son who had run away from his calling is welcomed back.

I wonder today have you a story of having run as far away from God as you possibly could, that maybe today there is still a distance between you and God. But today you can run as far away from the calling that God has for you, but in the end God will never run away from seeking after you, and waiting for you, and he wants to remind you what you are truly made for.

Today is a special day in the life of God's Church. We have been asked to mark this day as Vocation Sunday. It's a day where we can all consider that God will never run away from us. He will always desire that you seek out more about his calling on your life. This afternoon in St Anne's Cathedral, Alan McCracken along with other men and women will publicly declare that God has been calling them into ministry as they are ordained deacons into his Church.

The mission of God through his people is exploding in these chapters of the early church in Acts. We are now in chapter 13. A few weeks ago we saw the incredible growth of the Church in Antioch. Here we see for the first time the development of Christ followers being known as Christians. Last week we saw Peter escaping from Prison and the church growing further. The new church supports the believers in Jerusalem, and now as we reach Chapter 13, Paul & Barnabas are returning but now they bring this guy John Mark (who is Barnabas' cousin) with them. And so now in the midst of the leaders praying, the Holy Spirit tells them to set apart Paul & Barnabas for the ministry or the mission of the Gospel as they are commissioned. What a perfect day to be considering that sense of call in our own lives, and whether we are hearing God speak to us.

But before we go any further, let's just look at something very important in verse 1. Luke begins to list off the leaders – you have Barnabas who has come from the Jerusalem church, and then we have Simeon, Lucius and Manaen. Now if you are like any normal reader of the bible and you read this, you simply move on. You pay very little attention to these names, and hopefully you are relieved to be able to pronounce them. But you see these names are essential for our understanding of the call on God's people. You see none of these people were from Antioch. They weren't all Jews. Barnabas came from Cyprus. He was Jewish, but he wasn't from Jerusalem. And then you have Simeon also known as Niger. Now the word Niger means black in Greek. It's not a derogatory term in the way we might think. The reason it is here is because every person in these scriptures are Middle Eastern. It might be a shock folks, but there's no one with white skin here. So the reason why Simeon was called Niger was because he would probably have been from further south in Africa. He's black. Then Lucius is from Cyrene which would today be Libya. And then you have Manaen who was brought up with Herod the Tetrarch. Therefore he's definitely going to be a Gentile. Finally Saul who was not from Jerusalem – he was from Tarsus. So the reason why these names are important is that they represent the

diversity of leadership. And today as we think about the calling of God's people into ministry it is so important that the Church of God is representative of the Kingdom; and that is diverse. We run into a dangerous blockage when the leadership of a church is all about those with the dog-collar, or those that have the intellect to get them through Theological College. Yes I believe there is an important need to have people who commit themselves to the study of God's Word, but it's really important that the leadership of God's Church is built up of everyone. Our community needs to have a diverse group of people leading, representing the Gospel. Our church must look like our community, because if it doesn't and it's only a particular type of people coming then we are not truly reaching our community. Today I want everyone of us, irrespective of our background or intellect, to know that God is calling everyone of us into service and mission. We all can play an important part in the Mission of God.

So the leaders set apart Paul and Barnabas for God's service and Mark comes with them to help them. And the scriptures say that they travel from Antioch across to Seleucia and sail to Cyprus. Now the most logical reason why they go first to Cyprus is because Barnabas is from there. He will know many families, there will be places to stay and it is a good starting point for the rest of the mission. It's not going to be an entirely cold or hostile place for the gospel to be sown. Eventually they are called by this Roman Leader who asks them to come and preach the Gospel to him in Paphos. When Paul and Barnabas show up, they realise that a sorcerer is there also, he's a wolf in sheep's clothing. He would have been someone who if the proconsul had people in the community who were not abiding by the roman laws, he could bring out the Sorcerer to threaten spirits on them. The sorcerer soon realises that if his boss becomes engaged with the Gospel, then very soon the Proconsul is going to have no need for a sorcerer's powers, so Paul & Barnabas are real threats to his future. And so Bar-Jesus fights against them. Luke gives us this incredible picture of Paul facing him, telling him he

is a child of the Devil. Literally mist covers his eyes and he's blinded. His proconsul sees the powerful work of God and hears the proclamation of the Gospel, and through it gives his life to Jesus.

You know there's so much going on in this story, and yet interestingly Luke's drive is not all this craziness. What is interesting, and where I'd like you to really think this morning, is the lurking behind the scenes of Mark in this story. For the last 2 chapters, beginning in chapter 12, at every key moment in the life of the church, John Mark has always been there. And Luke makes sure to put him in the story. Remember last week that after Peter is led out of the prison, he is taken to the house of Mary who is John Mark's mum. John Mark is also the cousin of Barnabas. His home is the home of the early church, but while all this work is going on, John Mark is there. And then on our final verse today, Luke tells us that Mark departs back to Jerusalem. And at that point it feels like we are being set up by Luke to follow what is going to happen to this man, otherwise why put these little bits of detail in?

Even though we don't know much about John Mark, we come to a climax in Chapter 15 when they were in the desert in Galatia and it says Mark can't handle the calling that God has on him. Luke says that they deserted Paul on mission with them. When times got tough Mark couldn't handle the call. Barnabas and Paul get into a bit of a scrap over this because Paul is not keen to take someone who is not committed with them. Barnabas takes Mark back to Cyprus and we never hear about Mark again in the book of Acts.

From a narrative perspective where a writer describes little details of this man John Mark, and for it to all come to an end, many readers would have the right to ask why bother telling us? Every single scene that he is in would be just as good without John Mark being mentioned. It actually doesn't matter having him described. So why tell us?

Well it's this. Luke is trying to emphasise that you can run from the call of God but God will never run from his call from you. You can run away from the purposes that God has for you, and yet God will not give up on it however long it takes. He will wait and he will wait and he will wait. There are so many stories today of people who God has worked on for years, but has never abandoned them.

Verse 13 and then Chapter 15 may be the last time we hear about Mark in the Book of Acts, but it's not the last time we hear about him in the books of the Bible. About 10-15 years later after deserting from his calling, suddenly his name appears again in Paul's writing. In the book of Philemon Paul is writing a letter to a church leader, he mentions John Mark, not as someone who has abandoned his call, but instead as a fellow worker of Paul. So literally the very last moment we hear of Mark and his downfall, and 10 years later we understand that Paul feels compelled enough to encourage another church leader by mentioning Mark in a short letter as a fellow worker. What has happened?

And then in Colossians 4 Paul writes from his prison cell to the church in Colossae, and then suddenly he writes that Mark is with him. So folks, Mark is not just a fellow worker, but he is also imprisoned with Paul because of his faithfulness towards the Gospel.

Then 2 Timothy 4 as Paul writes to Timothy, the pastor of the church in Ephesus, he says, "I need you to send me Mark because I need him to be involved in my ministry".

How can someone go from a deserter to become a radical transformer of the Gospel? It's because God persistently goes after people, like you and me, and he sits waiting for us to return, just like the prodigal son.

27 odd years after the resurrection of Jesus, a first biography of the life of Jesus is written. It's called the Gospel of Mark. And guess who

wrote it? The man who ran away when times got tough. The guy who when the mission field was a bit too much, ran away. But God used that same man to write the very first story of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and today that story is told to many seeking after God and who turn their lives to Jesus.

Friends you can hide or run away from what God has called you to. You can run from the things that you are made for in God's purposes. Many of you are like the prodigal son, but the good news of Jesus is that he is waiting. Your running does not deter him in the least.

Maybe this morning, on this Vocation Sunday, God wants to remind you that he will wait. Maybe you are terrified about what that calling might mean for your life. What will it mean to your securities and finances? If you are running away from what God is calling on your life, if you don't know today what his call is on your life, then I encourage you today like the Prodigal to run towards Jesus because he has not forgotten you. You need to hear the story of Mark who just hangs out with Paul and Barnabas.

Let's take a moment therefore to consider and think about the ways in which God is calling you. I'd encourage you on this Vocation Sunday to come and speak with me at some time where we can sit and discern what God wants to do in your life. If God can use John Mark in such an incredible way, imagine what he can do in you if you are willing.