

Reflection for the 3rd Sunday after Epiphany by Rev'd Canon Michael Last

“As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” And immediately they left their nets and followed him.”

When it comes to making decisions - big, at times life changing decisions - what are you like? Some people will sit down with pen and paper, (or in the modern world a tablet of some kind) and work through all pros and the cons, reflecting, praying discerning the way forward. Others will go very much on instinct making quick impulsive decisions. Then there is a group in the middle who will do a bit of both.

Our Gospel reading contains at least two key decisions, after which nothing is quite the same again in Jesus' life.

The first, as Jesus hears about the arrest of John the Baptist he decides the time has come for his ministry to begin. To do that he leaves Nazareth, the place where he grew up, where he worked during his early adult years, and moves to Capernaum by the Sea of Galilee. The move places him at both the social and religious centre to the northwest corner of the Sea of Galilee. For its size, and the period, Galilee was densely populated. Josephus, the 1st century historian and a former governor of the area says there were 204 villages in this region with no fewer than 15,000 people.

It is an interesting move, because Jesus does not go to the bright lights of Jerusalem, where the temple is found, and the home of many of the religious leaders of his day, but to the town of Capernaum. The question is, why?

The answer may well lie in the people of that region. Go back to Josephus again and he describes local people like this. “Galileans were fond of innovation, by nature disposed to change and always ready for sedition.” If you look at the history of the revolts that took place against the Romans in the area they either began in Galilee or had a Galilean not far from the centre. The people were tough and courageous, and in many ways despised by those in the south, in Jerusalem.

In many ways they formed a marvellous seed-bed for the message Jesus came to bring. So Jesus begins his ministry where he intends it to carry on; not ministering to the intellectual, the rich, the famous but to the ordinary people of Galilee, a region looked down on by many.

As Matthew in his parallel account says *to fulfil what was said through the prophet Isaiah:*

“Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the way to the sea, along the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.”

As Jesus' ministry unfolds, we see the same time and again: Jesus reaching out to those in most need, those on the margins in society, those who are sick. It is a ministry that begins not in words, but with an action. That move sends out a clear message — God's love is for all regardless of who you are - rich or poor, from the best part of town or the less desirable area. So often, maybe, we lose sight of that; we relate to a particular group and then our blinkers mask out the rest of the world around us. Jesus, in where he starts his ministry, says very clearly that God's love is for all.

The second decision we see in that passage is one that appears to be almost instinctive. Peter and Andrew, hearing Jesus' call “Come, follow me,” immediately leaving their nets, their way of life and following.

To some of us this may seem slightly absurd; to leave behind a reasonable way of life working in the family business for what? “I will make you fishers of men”? Leaving comparative certainty and security - for uncertainty? Yet there is something about Jesus which makes them not question, simply respond.

We may also find ourselves questioning Jesus' judgement; why he chose Peter and Andrew - humble fishermen. What is it, though, that makes a good fisherman of the Sea of Galilee? They need to be courageous, facing the dangers, the squalls that can erupt so quickly on the lake; they need to have perseverance, patience, flexibility and to be unobtrusive so as not to frighten the fish; then a sense of timing, too - when to cast the nets and when not. These were qualities that Jesus could take and remould for what lay ahead of them in their new type of fishing, catching people for God.

As one writer puts it “Jesus' associates in this mission would not be merely supporters but would themselves

become fishers of men, winning new subjects for God's rule. These verses show the complete commitment which their involvement with Jesus would demand."

As we reflect on Peter and Andrew's calling two things seem to jump out.

First is a challenge to hear God's call to us and not to sit and ponder it for months, maybe years, before doing anything about it but, rather, to respond as the disciples did. They, I am sure, did not really have any idea where all this was taking them and, at times, they must have asked themselves whether it was right thing to do but, as Jesus calls, "at once they left their nets and followed him."

Secondly, we may think we have nothing to offer. What can I do for God? How can I serve God and his church? Yet when you look at who Jesus chose to be his first disciples you see the way he looks at things - not at the finished product but at the potential "I will make you" are his words. Following Christ is not just about allowing him into our lives, it is also about allowing him to shape us and use us as his people in his world, for tasks that will be both large and small.

As children grow and are educated, we are looking for them to develop, to fulfil their potential. And that is what Christ is looking for us to do in spiritual terms: with Jesus as our teacher and guide to grow and fulfil our potential in his service with the help of his spirit.

But all of that begins by hearing his call "come follow me" and at once, leaving our nets and following him.