

Reflection for Epiphany 3 by Rev'd Canon Michael Last

“As Jesus walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the lake—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, ‘Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.’ Immediately they left their nets and followed him.”

Change, Big Change

When it comes to making big changes in your lives, life changing decisions, what kind of person are you? Do you sit down with a pen and paper listing all the pros and the cons, carefully looking at the situation from all angles before deciding? Or are you impulsive - very much going by your heart not your head. But also, where in that process does prayer and discernment fit?

Today’s gospel reading contains at least two key decisions after which nothing is quite the same again - decisions that will shape lives not just in the short but also the long term.

Jesus hears the sad news of the arrest of John the Baptist and senses a critical moment has come. He has spent time in the wilderness following his baptism but now, we are told, he withdraws to Galilee. Jesus is leaving behind the past - Nazareth, the place where he grew-up, where he has worked in his early adult years, and moves to the town of Capernaum by the Lake of Galilee. The move places Jesus in both a social and religious center to the northern part of Galilee. For its size, Galilee had a dense population. Josephus, the Jewish historian of the period, said there were 204 villages in this region with no fewer than 15,000 people.

The move is fascinating because, as Jesus starts his ministry, he does not go to the bright lights of Jerusalem, where the temple is found, and the religious leaders of his day, rather to this town based on fishing. Why?

I suppose you could say it is like choosing Buckie rather than Edinburgh.

The answer may lie in the works of Josephus, a former governor of the area, who describes the people of the region like this. “Galileans were fond of innovation, by nature disposed to change and always ready for sedition.” Many of the Jewish revolts that took place against the Romans either began in Galilee or had a Galilean close to the centre. They were tough and courageous people, and in many ways despised by those in the south, in Jerusalem. In many ways they formed the perfect seedbed for the message Jesus came to bring.

That is the first thing for us to note - that Jesus begins his ministry where he intends it to flourish. By not ministering to the intellectual, the rich, the famous but to the ordinary people, the ordinary people of Galilee a region looked down on by many, he fulfils the words of 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 a social sense, those who are sick.

It’s a ministry that begins not with words but in where he sets up his base - God’s love is for all regardless of who you are - rich or poor, from the best part of town or the less “desirable” areas.

So often, as individuals and as church, we lose sight of that; we retreat into a particular group, and then the blinkers we wear mask out so much. Jesus in where he starts his ministry says very clearly - God’s love is for all.

That is the first decision – Jesus’ decision to move.

The other decision that takes place in this passage appears to be almost instinctive - Peter, Andrew James and John simply hearing Jesus' call *"Follow me, and I will make you fish for people,"* and immediately leaving their nets, their way of life, and follow Jesus.

To us this may seem absurd, leaving behind a reasonable way of life working in the family business - for what? *"I will make you fish for people."* Leaving comparative certainty for uncertainty, yet there is something about Jesus which makes them not question but simply respond.

We may also be tempted to question Jesus' judgement. Why does Jesus choose this group of humble fishermen? Maybe the answer lies in asking what makes a good fisherman on the Lake of Galilee. The fisherman needs to be courageous, facing the dangers - the squalls that could erupt so quickly on the lake, to have perseverance, patience, and flexibility. The fisherman also needed to be unobtrusive so as not to frighten the fish, and have a sense of timing - when to cast his nets and when not: all qualities that would be needed and Jesus could build on as he prepared them for their new type of fishing, catching people for God.

Jesus' associates in this mission would not be merely supporters but would themselves become fishers of people, winning new subjects for God's rule. These verses show the complete commitment their involvement with Jesus would demand. Peter, James and John (and to a lesser degree Andrew) formed a central core of the disciple group. Their call and ready response may be taken as typical of the group.

Two things come from this story. First is a challenge to each one of us to hear God's call to us and not to sit and ponder it for months, maybe years, before doing anything; rather to respond just as the disciples did. I am sure they did not really have any idea where all this was taking them, but at once they left their nets and followed him.

What is God's call to each one of us today? It may be in a new direction. How do we respond? When change comes, are we willing to accept the challenges that lie ahead.

Secondly, we may at times think we have nothing to offer. What can I do for God? How can I serve? Yet when you look at who Jesus chose to be his first disciples what becomes clear that Jesus does not look for the finished product, but at the potential. *"I will make you"*. Think too of the many mistakes the disciples made along the way - not least, Peter; yet the way God still used them to achieve great things.

Following Christ is about allowing him into our lives, and then allowing him to shape us and use us as his people, for tasks that may be large or small.

As children grow and are educated, we are looking for them to develop, to fulfil their potential. 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 the Holy Spirit.

But all of that begins by hearing his call: *"come, follow me"*.

As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of men." At once they left their nets and followed him.