

Third Sunday of Epiphany 2017

1 Corinthians 1: 10 – 18; Matthew 4: 12 – 23

Three things combine this morning: a Gospel reading which summarises how Jesus exercised his earthly ministry; the inauguration of Donald Trump; and the beginning of the week in which we commemorate Holocaust Memorial Day.

Of course we must be careful not to be too hasty to draw parallels between the rise of Donald Trump and the rise of Adolph Hitler that ultimately led to the Holocaust that we commemorate this week. We can't predict anything with certainty because the point about Donald Trump is that we just do not know where it is all leading. He campaigned by trading on fear and anxiety; and it would be ironic if we now were complicit in stoking that fear and anxiety in our response to him. Many decent and honest people voted Trump; many decent and honest people voted Brexit – many of us voted Brexit for good and

honourable reasons. So it must be our commitment and our prayer that the uncertainty these events have created is resolved in a way that promotes the common good.

What we do know, however, is that far-right activists from all over Europe meeting in Germany yesterday hailed the election of Donald Trump and the Brexit vote as an inspiration for the resurgence of the sort of politics that swept over Germany – and had its foothold in this country, too – in the 1930s. So, whilst it may be prudent to be cautiously open-minded about Donald Trump, it must nevertheless be true that we live in increasingly dangerous times.

The earthly ministry of Jesus took place in dangerous times. Indeed, at its very outset, his own cousin, John the Baptist, was arrested for political sedition. So the summary of a ministry in politically dangerous times that is today's Gospel, is informative reading for us today.

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The first thing Jesus does is withdraw. He doesn't seek out a confrontation with the political authorities of the day. He goes back home to the marginal locality in which he'd been brought up; and he teaches and he preaches and he heals folk; and he gathers around him people to be his disciples – people who are going to be trained up by immersing themselves rigorously and wholeheartedly in that teaching.

So the first lesson for us is to stay right where we are, committed to our community, committed to increasing our personal discipleship of Jesus Christ. That means being disciplined about worship and prayer; about breaking open God's Word and sharing bread together. It means being disciplined about studying and increasing our knowledge and understanding of the faith. It means being disciplined in our commitment to having fellowship with each other. It means that we need to be more than admirers of Jesus. We need to be followers of Jesus. We need to be people who, like the disciples who left their nets, give up pursuing our

own agendas and allow our whole identity to be shaped by our commitment to Jesus and the church through which he calls us to serve.

But make no mistake: this withdrawal from confrontation, this withdrawal to concentrate on discipleship, does not mean that we retreat into a holy huddle whilst the world passes us by. That's because Simon, Andrew, James and John built up their discipleship by attending to Jesus' preaching. And what he was preaching was "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

The kingdom of heaven. The values of the kingdom of heaven are peace, justice and the abolition of sickness and disease. These are explicitly political values. They are about political issues. And they are in direct opposition to a President of the United States who says "Bring it on" to a nuclear arms race and whose first executive act of office is to roll back provision of public health care. The values of the kingdom of heaven are

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in direct opposition to an administration in whose first day references to the human rights of women and gay people are removed from the Whitehouse website. The values of the kingdom of heaven are in direct opposition to someone who publicly mimics and pours scorn on disabled people. The values of the kingdom of heaven are in direct opposition to someone who dehumanises people seeking refuge from war by labelling them “illegals.”

Discipleship of Jesus Christ is deeply political. It's about engaging with political issues. And it's about making political choices to live differently. The way that Simon and Andrew and James and John left their nets, and walked away from them to follow Jesus, shows us that there is complete discontinuity between discipleship and the prevailing narrative.

They threw away their businesses and their livelihoods. What fools they were! It was counter-intuitive; it was risky; it defied popular wisdom and

common sense. And, of course, it led them straight through the cross. It was in this morning's first reading, from the first letter to the Corinthians that Paul said “the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”

So this may not be an attractive message, but it's a powerful one. There are more important things than maximising commercial effectiveness. There are more important things than doing deals to look after ourselves. It is more important to respect God's image in everybody. It is more important to share the bountifulness of the earth with everybody, the way he shares his life with us. It is more important to look out for one another. And building bridges is more important than building walls.

And we know this because we have seen a great light. And even if we feel that we are sitting “in the region and shadow of death” light has dawned and the

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kingdom of heaven has come near. Don't just be an admirer of Jesus: follow him and be part of that kingdom.

Amen.