

Third Sunday in Epiphany 2020 (26.01.2020)

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

If we were to take a straw poll of what is the most memorable, attention-grabbing, stand-out feature of the Gospel we've just heard proclaimed. I reckon most people would comment on Jesus saying to Simon "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." We don't say "fisher of men" these days because we're striving to be inclusive, but that phrase probably is lodged in many people's memories: "I will make you a fisher of men" does have a certain resonance to it. And I suspect that most people will have latched on to that as the Gospel was proclaimed.

It may also be that what grabbed people's attention was the immediacy of the response of the various people whom Jesus called. We're told that Simon and Andrew left their nets *immediately* and that James and John *immediately* left their boat and their father and followed Jesus.

Both these features – the fisher of men bit and the immediate response – are important and they both deserve some attention.

The passage we've heard from this morning is from early on in Matthew's Gospel, from chapter 4, and Simon is introduced as being also called Peter. In fact it's later in Matthew's Gospel that we get an account of him acquiring his alternative name. Jesus says to him "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church." That's, of course, a pun because Peter means rock. Jesus says I'm calling you a name that means rock because you're going to be the rock on which the church is built.

So the ministry entrusted to Peter is passed on by him to the church which was built upon him. Peter was to fish for people. And so, the church is to fish for people. The church is here to pull people up out of the deep waters of life. If you're in a mess, you've screwed up, you're confused, a bit of a misfit, and at least

The Revd Matthew Pollard, Rector of Bridlington Priory

border-line dysfunctional, you're in the right place and you're in good company. It's what the church is all about: simply being accepting and loving and conferring dignity. No ifs, no buts, no strings attached, no need to comply, no need to conform: God loves everybody.

It's clear that Jesus had a magnetic charisma. And his call on our lives has that same quality today. There is no excuse for resisting his call that counts. It doesn't work saying we're not good enough, or sorted enough, or wholesome enough, that we don't come in a nice, neat and respectable package. Because Jesus doesn't care about those things. He calls us as we are for us to respond as we are. He didn't call those fishermen in the Gospel reading because they were already Apostles: he called them so that they *could become* Apostles. If you think you're not good enough, actually you're dead right – but you're missing the point. Jesus calls us *because* we're not good enough. He pours out

his love for us *because* we're not good enough. And he accepts us as we are.

If these two features of the Gospel reading – the fisher of men phrase and the immediacy of the response – are its stand-out features, there are others features of what we've heard proclaimed that get overshadowed by them but in fact serve to corroborate their force consolidate their impact.

The big epiphany moment in this reading, the revelation through Jesus of what God is like, comes at the very beginning, in what might be overlooked as a piece of introductory flannel that does no more than lead us into what the story really has to say. But just stop and linger over that introductory flannel. John the Baptist's ministry is drawing to its end. He's been imprisoned. And Jesus begins his ministry.

And the place he chooses to begin it is Galilee, Galilee of the Gentiles, the upper part of Galilee where many

Egyptians, Arabians and Phoenicians lived. Jesus – literally – makes himself at home in the midst of ambiguity and impurity. Where can you find Jesus? In dubious places! Don't go looking in royal halls and palaces: look in a messy stable. Don't go looking where people's lives are neat and wholesome: look in the melting pots where diversity is celebrated and cultural norms are irrelevant. Such a place was Capernaum on Galilee and such are places where Jesus is most relevant today.

Note what Jesus went there to do. He went to proclaim a word of fulfilment: that the light has dawned and the kingdom of heaven is near. If we see Jesus, we see the kingdom of God at hand. Jesus chooses dubious places. Therefore, the kingdom of God is to be found in dubious places. The outward sign of all this in the story, is that people were cured of every disease and every sickness. What's not to be responded to immediately?

A postscript to this is to consider how this business of Jesus accepting everybody, and hence our call in his name to be equally accepting of everybody, helps us respond to the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz and the commemoration of International Holocaust Memorial Day, which fall tomorrow, the 27th January.

It is often said that an aspect of epiphany is a call to unity. That's usually thought of in terms of unity among Christians. And that's why the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity has been over this last week. It's why our reading this morning from 1 Corinthians is about rooting out factionalism amongst followers of Jesus. These are important things, but the call for unity is broader than that. It is the recognition that there is dignity in difference. It's about recognising that Jesus chose to be at home where there was difference and diversity. And it's in our determination to resist the temptation to want everybody to conform to an ideal in the triviality of everyday living, on scales

The Revd Matthew Pollard, Rector of Bridlington Priory

that we can comprehend, that we entrust our hope that we can avoid hatred and intolerance on scales that we cannot comprehend.

Amen.