

Sermon for the 12th Sunday after Trinity (03 September 2017)

Readings (Special for series on Discipleship – not as in the lectionary):

Isaiah 9:1-3
Romans 12:9-end
Matthew 4:12-22

I wonder what comes to your mind when we speak about discipleship? Is it an idea that fills you with excitement and enthusiasm? Or does it conjure up a picture of rules to follow, jobs to do and demands to be met?

I imagine the picture most of us get is somewhere between the two, but I do feel we sometimes do give the impression that being a disciple of Jesus, being a Christian, being part of the Church, however we may put it, is more about meeting demands than it is about joy and excitement. There are, after all, always jobs that need doing – being churchwarden, helping in Junior Church, being on the rota for this or that, and many, many others – and, if we are not looking for help with jobs, we are asking you to give money.

All those things are very important – but they are not what is at the heart of Christian discipleship! I want to give you a broader, brighter picture today – and to do that we'll look at the call of those first disciples – the fishermen – that we read about in our Gospel reading today.

But, before we get to read about the call of the disciples, our reading tells us that Jesus left Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and made his home in Capernaum – a town on the northern edge of Lake Galilee. It was probably a wise move – to make his new start in a new place and avoid being always thought of as the local carpenter. Indeed, we know that, when he did go back to Nazareth, he got a rather poor reception.

So Capernaum was going to be Jesus' new base. But Matthew makes the move more significant by saying it fulfilled a prophecy by Isaiah which referred to the area around Galilee. The prophecy calls it the land of Zebulun and Naphtali, Galilee of the Gentiles – it was where the ancient tribes of Israel, Zebulun and Naphtali, had settled centuries before, and it was on the periphery of the country and had quite a large Gentile or non-Jewish population. It was something of a backwater.

But see what that prophecy says about this remote outback; it's there that people will see a great light – it's there that light has dawned. "The people that sat in darkness have seen great light, and for those who sat in the region of the shadow of death light has dawned."¹

Light has dawned – when we use that phrase we usually mean that we have a new understanding – and it seems somehow more exciting or relevant. What Isaiah said was going to happen in this remote part of the country would have a certain Wow! factor about it. In fact, Matthew seems to be wanting to emphasise that – he seems to be making his

¹ Matthew 4:16 NRSV

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own translation of that verse, which doesn't quite line up word for word with the original that we read for our Old Testament reading. It's as if he wanted to emphasise the Wow! factor, the dawning of the light. Matthew wants us to know that something different, even exciting, was indeed happening in this remote part of the country.

But in the original version we read from the OT we also read an additional verse which Matthew doesn't quote. After reading about the people seeing a great light, v 3 of our OT reading goes on, "You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest."² The dawning of this light, according to Isaiah, was going to bring great joy, and Matthew may well have had that in mind as well as he quoted this piece of scripture.

So, in this remote backwater of the country, light was going to dawn, joy was going to increase, something with a bit of a Wow factor was going to happen. In the next verse – verse 17 – Matthew tells us what it was that did all that. Jesus started to proclaim that the kingdom of heaven had come near!

In other places, particularly in Mark's and Luke's Gospels, the phrase used to sum up Jesus' message is "kingdom of God" rather than "kingdom of heaven". The gist of the message is that God was about to intervene and take control in the world – God was about to take over! Matthew prefers to say "kingdom of heaven", probably because he is reluctant, as a Jew, to use the name of God directly. But it's worth remembering that, when we use the word "heaven", we are usually talking about somewhere nice! The kingdom that Jesus was proclaiming wasn't going to be a place where God chucked his weight about like a typical first century ruler, let alone like some tyrant. It was going to be heaven! It was indeed a Wow! message, a message of joy and light.

And it's immediately following this introduction to Jesus and his message that Matthew tells us about Jesus' encounter with the fishermen by the lake. The way Matthew tells the story we could almost believe this was the first time the fishermen had met Jesus. But Jesus had already been proclaiming his message, and it seems more than likely Jesus was known to the fishermen at least by repute, and it's quite possible they had heard him speak and knew something of his message.

If you think about it, it's hardly likely that anyone, let alone four people who were each busily engaged in his occupation, would suddenly up and off with a total stranger who did nothing more than call out, "Follow me." It would almost be to imply that Jesus had a sort of hypnotic effect on them – which is hardly what we would expect of Jesus. No. Far more likely they recognised that the man who was calling them was the man with the exciting new message – and it would seem well worth while finding out what he wanted if nothing else.

If we read Luke's and John's Gospels, we get the idea that Jesus was actually someone the fishermen already knew quite well. John tells us that Andrew was introduced to Jesus by

² Isaiah 9:3 NRSV

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John the Baptist, and he in turn introduced him to his brother Simon Peter. You can read that story in the first chapter of John's Gospel³. Luke tells us that Jesus had already visited Simon Peter's home and healed his mother-in-law of a fever, and that Jesus' call to follow him came not only after that but also after he had enabled Peter to make a miraculous catch of fish. You can read those stories in Luke's Gospel, at the end of chapter 4 and the beginning of chapter 5.

However you look at it, it seems the fishermen were already well aware of Jesus and what he was doing. They already knew he was a man with a message, a message of joy and hope, a message that God was acting – and probably had shown evidence to prove it in miracles. Of course, we know they did misunderstand that message – they thought at first that Jesus would somehow overthrow the Roman occupying forces and establish a temporal kingdom reflecting the heyday of Israel's history in the time of David and Solomon. It took them a while to realise that the kingdom of heaven Jesus proclaimed was something very different. But what they did know was that, when Jesus' call to follow him came – perhaps not entirely unexpectedly – they recognised it as a call to join him in proclaiming hope and joy and being part of what God was doing.

And that is what the call to follow Jesus means for us as well. That is what discipleship is all about. Proclaiming Jesus' message of hope and joy and being part of what God is doing today. Of course there will be times when that requires hard work and maybe even sacrifices. But they'll be work and sacrifices with a purpose – a purpose which leads to hope and joy for us and for others.

And let's not get hung up on the idea that the fishermen left all for Jesus' sake, as our hymn just now put it. Yes, of course at one level that was true. They made a very full and deep commitment to Jesus and his work. As our reading says, "Immediately, they left their nets and followed him."⁴ But the nets and the boat were still theirs. And they used them. Several times we read of Jesus and his disciples crossing the lake in a boat – whose boat do you think it was, if it wasn't Peter's and Andrew's or perhaps James' and John's? They put their boat at the disposal of Jesus and the work of proclaiming the kingdom. It was used for the work. It wasn't just abandoned and forgotten. And I wouldn't be surprised if there wasn't the odd fishing trip to provide funds for the work, though we do know there were a number of people, particularly the women, who supported them⁵.

And we know that Peter and Andrew had a house – it was there that Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law. Reading between the lines in some of the Gospel accounts it seems that it may have been in that house that Jesus stayed when he returned to his base in Capernaum. Again, the disciples didn't abandon their home, let alone leave their families with nowhere to go, but put their home at Jesus' disposal.

Being called to be a disciple, being called to follow Jesus, doesn't necessarily involve giving up everything we have, neither does it mean neglecting our families. It may involve work

³ See John 1:35-42

⁴ Matthew 4:20

⁵ See Luke 8:1-3

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and sacrifices and almost certainly a re-thinking of our priorities and the way we use what we have, but that is not what is at the heart of it. What it does mean is to proclaim and bear witness to the joy and the hope that the first disciples realised was at the heart of Jesus' message. What it does mean is to proclaim and show Jesus' message of love. What it does mean is being committed to joining in with what God is doing today. It seems those first disciples found that an exciting prospect, something with a bit of a Wow! factor. Does that sound an exciting prospect to you, too? Are you willing to commit to it?