

3rd Sunday of Epiphany, Eucharist

Matthew 4:1-23

Mother Alice

This morning we have heard the story of the calling of the first disciples, the fishermen brothers Simon and Andrew, and James and John. In a few short understated verses, we see what is a lifechanging event for these men, their encounter with Jesus, his call to them, and their response – to leave their nets and their boats and follow him. Like many stories of Jesus' ministry I am often left with more questions – I want to know more about these men and their background, want to know more about what it was about Jesus that made them, with seemingly instant obedience, stop what they were doing and come ashore to follow him. Did they know what it meant to say 'yes' to his call? Did they think it was just for the day? Rather than their whole lives? And Jesus – had he already chosen these men long ago? Had he been observing them, did he know they were ready, the right people to be his disciples? Or did he simply decide that day that these fishermen were the right people to accompany him, to share in the ministry of preaching and teaching and healing that he was about to begin? So many questions!

But it got me thinking about my own story of calling. And actually in some ways my sense of calling wasn't that dissimilar. Someone, a friend from my school, simply invited me to go on a weekend away with her youth group, and at that weekend I heard some verses from Romans chapter 12, words that seemed to speak very deeply into my life, and I felt God's love, and invitation to journey deeper. And I tentatively opened my hands in prayer, as my way of saying 'yes'. And I could go on, but I won't for now. The rest as they say, is His – story. This same passage was in the midday lectionary last week and we discussed amongst ourselves our stories of calling – some said they had never had a definite sense of calling, that they were brought up in a Christian household and had never known a time where they didn't know God's love. Some, like me, could describe a moment, or a season, where something changed and they went from not believing to believing. I wonder if I could ask the same question to you. If you were raised in a Christian household, or if your decision to follow Christ came when you were a little older, during a particular event, or season of life where God broke through and you encountered Him? [Perhaps we could even have a show of hands – if you were raised a Christian could you put your left hand up, and if you came to Christ in a particular moment could you put your right hand up?]

But even within those two categories there will be so many differences, so many nuances, so many personal stories of faith and encounter. And I would love to hear your stories. Love to know something of your journey. I would love to know and give thanks for the people God placed in your life at that time – those who He used to lead you to faith, to pray for you, to encourage you. Because just as God used those people so he is using you to bring his love to others. Some of you may have had life changing encounters with Jesus, and been called 'out' of where we were, just like the first disciples. Some of us may have had faith come in a slower, more gradual way, and God worked to equip us where we were – bringing healing and transformation to our situations. Each of our callings of journey's of faith will be different, but as we share them with one another, so we build up our collective faith, and thankfulness for all that God is doing in the life of His Church.

Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury has said: There is no better decision that any person can make in their life, at any point, in any place, in any circumstance, than to follow Jesus Christ. We can see in the life of Jesus's first disciples the way that following Jesus changed them, and we know in our own lives how following Jesus has changed us. We are the people in this generation who, because of our own stories of faith, are equipped to share the Gospel with others. Those who need to know that they are loved, that God cares about their needs, that God wants to invite them into fullness of life, that God's grace makes forgiveness and reconciliation, and hope possible.

Earlier this week I was discussing with a parishioner the kind of vocabulary we use to describe our faith, and they were saying they felt 'proud' to be a Christian, that they didn't think faith was a private thing and that people should know what we believe and why it matters and what difference it makes in our lives. I was reminded of the language of St Paul who speaks of 'boasting' in the Gospel – such a strong, word. Nowadays we probably use the word 'confident' to describe how we as a Church would love people to feel about sharing their faith – in fact the Diocese of London has as its vision the aim 'for every Londoner to encounter the love of God in Christ', and to enable this the Diocese wants Churches to do 3 things: grow confident disciples, develop compassionate communities, inspire relative growth. I really encourage you to think about this vision, and the ways in which God is working not just here in our own parish through the Mission Action Plan that we have discerned together, but wider. One of the joys of meeting up with other clergy is hearing what they are doing in their own churches – some similar, and many different. And in this week of prayer for Christian unity we rejoice in the different ways that God calls different Churches in different places to make known His love.

I think that our confidence to share the Gospel, and to invite others to encounter the love of God in Christ comes through learning to share our own stories. And I wonder if today, over coffee, we might have courage to share with one another not just what's going on in our lives today, or this week. But to share deeper. To speak about God, about faith, about our hopes and fears. To ask one another to pray for us, and ask how we can pray for others. Because love for God, and love for one another, is powerful – and as we grow in faith, and in brotherly love, seeking unity, fellowship and the will of God – then we, like the first disciples, can truly live out our call to proclaim the Kingdom of God afresh in this generation.

Amen