

St. Matthew's Anglican Church, Islington  
Sermon by the Reverend Stephen Blackmore

**January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2015 – 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Epiphany**

*Readings: Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Ps 62:6-14; 1 Cor 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20*

A Jewish rabbi and a Catholic priest were good friends. They were at a community picnic one day and the priest was eating a ham sandwich. "You know," he said to his friend, "this ham sandwich is simply delicious. I know you're not supposed to eat ham, but I don't understand why something as good as this would be forbidden to you. Why don't you break down and try one?" To which the rabbi replied, "Sure, at your wedding."

People look at you a little different when you're a 'man of the cloth'. Sometimes I don't like it, other times I find it amusing. Just this week I ended up at the wrong address while making a pastoral visit. This poor fellow opened the door, took one look at my collar, and I could've sworn he thought he was looking at the grim reaper. I immediately apologized and told him I must be at the wrong house. Confused, the man turned and wished me a good day. I chuckled as I walked back to my car at the start I'd given the man. I'm sure it's not every day that this fellow opens his front door to find a priest grinning back at him!

Priests do have a peculiar calling and, historically at least, that calling has required clergy to live differently from laity. Some traditions require their clergy to be celibate, many require them to wear different clothing, and there is an expectation that clergy live 'holier' lives.

When people hear stories like we read this morning, of the calling of the fishermen-turned-disciples, they may think this relates more to clergy than anyone. After all, Jesus called the disciples to leave behind their 'secular lives' – jobs and families were forsaken in order to keep intimate company with Jesus. Their teacher and friend modeled the life of ministry to them, and then empowered them to carry on this ministry. These disciples become 'apostles' – 'sent ones' who went out to spread the gospel to the ends of the earth.

As the Church grew, more formal leadership structures emerged, the chief authorities being bishops who were at one time commissioned by a bishop, who was consecrated by a bishop, who was consecrated by one of the original apostles. We call this apostolic succession and still believe that our current bishops can trace their authority all the way back to these first disciples. So it is no wonder that many might think a passage like today's gospel relates more to clergy than the flock – but I think this would be a grave mistake.

We are indebted to the Reformation for renewing the Church's sense that we are a priesthood of all believers. We are all called to be disciples of Jesus. The Reformation's emphasis on returning to the Scriptures, and on enabling laity to read the Scriptures as easily as the clergy, allowed for a deeper appreciation that the Scriptures are written for all of us. And every single one of us ought to see ourselves in the text: to relate to the characters, and to discern how Christ continues to call us today.

In today's gospel Jesus picks up where John the Baptist left off: proclaiming the need for repentance because God's kingdom was near. He was travelling throughout Galilee, a region or district in northern Israel. There are many inferences in the Scriptures where people of Galilee (and its cities, like Nazareth) are regarded as 'second-class' citizens compared to those from Jerusalem. But there is also historical evidence to suggest that some very important Jewish rabbis, the Tannaim, spent most of their lives there. Their followers believed them to be not only great teachers, but also miracle workers. These teachers gathered many of the common folk to be their followers and the region developed a reputation as a wellspring of miracle workers and mystical philosophers of all sorts.

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So we know that what Jesus was doing, travelling, teaching, healing, and gathering followers, was not all that uncommon at that time. Perhaps the fishermen had encountered some of these other rabbis before, perhaps they'd already been solicited to join a movement? Perhaps Jesus was just one option among many at the time...so why him? Why would these men leave behind familiarity and security, family and vocation, to follow Jesus?

When I read the story of Jesus inviting Simon Peter & Andrew, and then James & John, to follow him, I thought a little about first impressions. Think about the most important people in your life today: a spouse, a child, a friend or neighbor. What do you remember about the first time you met them? Did it feel like a rather ordinary encounter, or could you sense that there was something special about this person? Maybe it wasn't a very positive first encounter – but even so circumstances kept you in each other's lives so that a meaningful relationship could be forged. Or perhaps something sparked inside you and you just knew that this was going to be the beginning of something beautiful.

Was it like this for Peter, Andrew, James, and John? Details in Mark's gospel are often sparse. We aren't given many clues as to the disciples' state of mind. We don't know if they'd met Jesus previously, or knew who he was. Maybe they'd tried following others before, only to return to familiar lives. What we do know is that this encounter with Jesus moved them to act quickly and decisively. Mark loves to use the word 'immediately': immediately Peter and Andrew left their nets to follow Jesus, immediately Jesus calls James and John, and immediately they leave behind their father in the boat to follow Jesus.

Perhaps they were intrigued by the manner of Jesus' invitation. His call comes with a mission that the brothers can relate to, and yet be uncertain about. Jesus says that if they follow him they will fish for people. Fishing they understood, but what did he mean by fish for people? Jesus was calling them in their own context and used their current expertise to help them to begin to understand the vocation of discipleship. Just as they used their nets to expertly reel in a haul of fish, so they would be given tools to draw others into God's kingdom.

Along the way they would fumble and bumble, stumble and fall. They would doubt, be thrust into harm's way, and be tempted to turn back. Walking with Jesus brought more questions than answers, more rejection than acceptance, more risk than security. They didn't comprehend who Jesus was, at least not until his resurrection, but nevertheless they respond and 'follow him'. They take a step of faith that thrusts them on a dangerous and exciting journey.

Why are you on the path of discipleship? Like those fishermen 2000 years ago there are a lot of options for us to hitch our cart to: Another world religion, perhaps, that is less demanding or offers easier answers? That ambiguous and shallow spirituality so popular today that allows one to call oneself 'spiritual but not religious'? A strictly materialistic philosophy that will only assent to what science can prove definitively? There is no shortage of options out there. So why are you here? Why are you at St. Matthew's? Why are you a part of a faith tradition that demands your entire being? Why do you take the time to worship each week and sacrifice a portion of your income to support the ministry of this parish?

Sometimes I ask myself why I have chosen the life I have – that maybe I misunderstood what God was calling me to. But then I start to think of those moments – the first experiences I had meeting Christ. Praying the 'sinner's prayer' with my mom out on our porch after getting my summer haircut; being baptized by my father when I was 10, praying in the Spirit as a teenager, being moved by God's love time and again. I know I was called to follow Christ, and that calling anchored me as I discerned

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what vocation God was leading me into. And the experiences I had in discerning my calling to ministry had an awfully similar feeling to those I had in my youth. I was drawn by God, my desire was fanned at the right times, I was introduced to people who encouraged me and affirmed me. And my life in the Church, among my fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, showed me I was on the right path.

I believe God has a calling for all of us. Whether we're clergy, teachers, nurses, carpenters, plumbers, or taxi drivers, Jesus is calling us. Wherever we are on our journey it's important to recall that moment we first heard and responded to that call. We might have a hard time remembering one specific moment, for many of us it's been several less dramatic steps of faith that's taken us to where we are now. But we must remember them. We must talk to each other about them so that we may be encouraged in our faith and be able to discern how God has called us to be together as a community of disciples that excels at fishing for people. Amen.