

Jesus says, “Follow me” ...

... the exhilaration of discovering who we really are

A sermon given on the Third Sunday of Epiphany, 22nd January 2023 – by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster

Matthew 4:12-23

We all love the Gospel of God's unconditional love: "*Come unto me, all you who travel and are heavy laden and I will refresh you*"; or "*Your sins are forgiven you*"; or "*Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people*". That message that whoever you are, whatever you've done, however hard you find it to love yourself - nevertheless God loves you; He accepts you; He feels compassion for you; He has mercy on you and he welcomes you. That message is very powerful - it's powerful, it's true and, if we can receive it, it changes the way we feel about ourselves, about other people, about God. It changes the way we feel about life itself. It's an important message and we need to hear it.

However, the message of God's unconditional love is only half of the message because there's also a summons such as we hear in this morning's gospel: "*Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near*"; and in other places "*Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations*"; and elsewhere "*If anyone wants to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me*"; And again in this morning's reading, "*Follow me and I will make you fish for people*".

Now, this side of the gospel message is more challenging - confrontational, even. It insists that we don't just sit there passively receiving good things, but that we allow ourselves to be changed; that we respond to God by offering ourselves up; that we're willing to change direction and be led, well, who knows where?

And if I'm honest, I've always found that a little bit difficult. I like the idea of God's unconditional grace reaching out to me regardless of who I am or what I've done. And in theory, I like the idea that this should change me and make me more like Jesus and make me want to serve God more wholeheartedly. But in practice, it can all feel just a tad threatening, a little bit too costly, a little bit uncomfortable. But what I've been noticing in the readings in recent weeks is that this summons to follow Jesus doesn't have to sound like that.

It can actually sound deeply exhilarating and life-giving because the whole language of repentance and following Jesus isn't about becoming something you're not. It's about becoming who you truly are, which is the whole point of our life's journey - to discover who we truly are as God's creatures and children. It's the language of journey, the language of adventure, the language of saga and of going on a quest - it puts me a little bit in mind of Frodo Baggins in

Lord of the Rings, feeling very small and inadequate, but saying, "I will take the ring even though I do not know the way."

I love the message of God's compassion and mercy reaching out to me because I know how much I need to hear that message. But if the message is only about receiving a wonderful sense of peace - what are you meant to do next? It's all very well rejoicing in peace, perfect peace. But we still have lives to live. Salvation isn't an invitation to turn your back on the world and settle down in a celestial retirement home - (Not that there is anything wrong with retirement homes, I have my place booked.) - but as an image of salvation, it's not very satisfactory. Salvation is about having your imagination transformed. It's about having your mind renewed, so that we see following Jesus not as a dutiful embrace of new tasks and burdens, but as a journey in the presence of the best friend in the world, heading towards the best destination you could imagine, in the course of which there will be all sorts of adventures and surprises, some joyful and some less so - but in the course of which we shall discover who we truly are and the difference we can truly make.

So this January, if your life seems becalmed and your faith seems dull, ponder the commands in this passage - "*Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near*" - that's not a command to deliver more moral and upright life or to try harder: it's an invitation to change direction; to head for a different goal; to live in the light of the spiritual reality of God's presence; and the presence of God's love that you hadn't perhaps noticed before.

And when Jesus says "*Follow me and I will make you fish for people*", the amazing thing is the disciples did. They left their nets and followed him. Something must have captured their hearts and imaginations.

I wonder what would life be like if we did that?

What would it be like if we allowed our imaginations to be so captivated by Jesus that we only wanted to walk with him? We only wanted to use our accumulated gifts and life experience in his service. And we saw our own lives being like those of the heroes of old, embarking upon a great quest, concerned only with finding the Holy Grail and receiving glory and honour in the courts of the King.

Reading Text

Matthew 4:12-23

¹² Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. yHe left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the lake, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, ¹⁴ so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: ¹⁵ 'Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles - ¹⁶ the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.' ¹⁷ From that time Jesus began to proclaim, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'

¹⁸ As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the lake-for they were fishermen. ¹⁹ And he said to them, 'Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.' ²⁰ Immediately they left their nets and followed him. ²¹ As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. ²² Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him. ²³ Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.