Sermon for 3rd in Ordinary Year A

Readings: 1 Corinthians 1:10-18; Matthew 4:12-23

i

The fishermen had been with John the Baptist and it was there that they first met Jesus according to John’s Gospel. Having swapped allegiances, with the Baptist’s encouragement, they are now back home in Galilee waiting for Jesus to come for them. When Jesus hears that the Baptist has been arrested, he takes this as his signal to move. The one who was sent to ‘Prepare the way of the Lord’ can do no more; it is now time for Jesus to take up his mission.

It starts in an unpromising place: Galilee – full of gentile influence, far from the temple, seen as a cultural backwater, despised by the elite of Jerusalem.

It starts with unpromising people: What can a few Galilean fishermen hope to achieve against the power, privilege and superior theological education of the Sanhedrin?

But the kingdom of God starts where it starts and starts with whom it starts because that is what God has chosen to do – hence the Isaiah quotation in verses 15-16. If we follow God’s lead we need not fear no matter how much the world might deride our prospects.

ii

Jesus starts by calling together the foundations of a new Israel. The fishermen are the first section of what will soon become an inner circle of 12 disciples. There is obvious provocative symbolism in the choice of 12 disciples as the new representatives of the 12 tribes of Jacob. This is a radical political and religious revolution. No wonder they start in the back blocks of Galilee rather than in the temple precincts.

The effects on those who respond to the call are equally radical. They leave behind their old lives, their jobs, their families, their homes and set off with Jesus into an open, unknown future. Jesus has also left his home town of Nazareth behind and moved to Capernaum. Something new is afoot. It is revolutionary. The cost of following Jesus will be high, but the promise of the kingdom induces increasing numbers to take the risk.

The fishermen were originally the Baptist’s followers and so they know of his fate. The Baptist has been thrown into Herod Antipas’ prison. When they drop their nets to follow Jesus their decision is both brave as well as sacrificial. The stakes are already high.

Parables will be told about pearls of great price and treasure hidden in fields. What is at stake is of such importance that people are challenged to abandon their old ways and strike out in a new direction following Jesus. The new Israel is being led by Jesus, as the old Israel was led by God, over the desert to the Promised Land.

The implication is that the first Exodus never truly achieved its fulfilment. Politically and historically it may appear to have resulted in the Israelites gaining their freedom from Egypt and reaching the Promised Land, but the troubled history of the nation since implies that their dreams crumbled in the harsh reality of their political and religious choices over the centuries.

Jesus uses the paradigm of the Exodus to illuminate his own mission. He redefines the meaning of freedom, the nature of the Promised Land and the understanding of the temple, Law and kingdom. In so doing, he also redefines the very nature of God. The claims his followers make on behalf of Jesus will change the world. Those claims will certainly change the lives of those who believe.

iii

Corinthians makes poor reading after that. The new Israel is soon divided as badly as the old Israel. The Corinthian church splinters into rival factions behind Paul, Peter, Apollos and even Christ. The Church is called to be a global healing, reconciling force in the world to bring Jew and Gentile, rich and poor, male and female together in harmonious synergy. Old habits clearly die hard in Corinth.

We have here a snapshot in time of the infant Church grappling with the new reality of Christian allegiance. They are still thinking about baptism in the old way; when John the Baptist baptised, people were baptised into a relationship with him. The Corinthians need to appreciate that Christian baptism does not work in the same way. The person administering the baptism is not important. Everyone being baptised is entering a new relationship with Christ and with all fellow Christians who also belong to Christ, not the individual who administered the baptism.

Christian baptism is the equivalent of Jewish proselyte baptism, rather than John the Baptist’s baptism; it is the entry into the new Israel, not the joining of a small band focussed on the person who poured the water.

We also note the way Paul wrote the letter. Paul has to correct himself about a baptism he did perform which in his previous thought he had overlooked. Obviously, once written, the letter was not revised, or scrubbed out. Furthermore, when the letter was subsequently copied and copied again until it was included in the New Testament, copiers did not take the initiative to correct Paul’s memory and change the wording. Paul’s letters were respected and copied faithfully in the form in which they had been received.

Today’s passage from Corinthians is depressing reading in the sense that the rival factions fall so short of what Christianity aspires to be and makes us aware of the far more serious disgraces that have been perpetrated by the Church over the centuries and to the present day. Sometimes Christians are an embarrassment and we have to admit it.

On the other hand, however, today’s reading from Corinthians offers some reassurance.

Firstly, it reassures us that the New Testament record has not been doctored to hide embarrassing truths. We have a faithful picture, warts and all, of those who first followed Christ.

Secondly, it is reassuring to see that problems can be sorted out, misunderstandings can be amended and things can move on. The misunderstanding of Christian baptism and the mistaken belief that it engendered a relationship with the person performing the baptism rather than primarily to Christ was quickly put right and now comes down to us through Scripture as a half-forgotten historical detail.

It is good that so many countries now use ecumenical baptism certificates to help express that unity we have in Christ through baptism and the mutual recognition of baptism must serve as a symbol of the Church’s unity, even if that unity is not yet mirrored at the Eucharistic table.

Thirdly, the passage reassures us that God may still be able to use us. The passage dispels any romantic notion that the Church ever enjoyed a time of pure faith and spotless discipleship and uncontested unity.

It may seem an odd thing to take comfort in the fact that the Church has always been a mess, but I think the fantasy that the first Christians were so much better than we are robs us of our confidence and fills us with numbing guilt. We often feel like failures before we start because we compare ourselves with an idealised vision of the Church which never actually existed.

The fact that God has been able to use such folk who misunderstand, are less than gracious, who can’t get along with one another, is a great comfort to me when I look at the worldwide Church today. It makes me dare to hope that God may still be able to use you and me. After all, not even those original fishermen got things right all the time. Far from it.

**Rev Dr Trevor Hoggard**

**May 2016**