Sermon for 3rd in Ordinary Time Year B

 Readings: Jonah 3:1-5,10; Mark 1:14-20

i

In Frank McCourt’s semi-autobiographical novel, *Angela’s Ashes*, his father goes out one day to buy a packet of fags, and he never returns. They later discover he’s gone off to find work in England. But he walks away without a farewell and never sends back a penny to his struggling family back in Ireland. Sudden disappearances can be a mark of fecklessness, sometimes of desperation, but they are always distressing to those left behind.

So what made the disciples go to work as normal in the morning and not return at night or the next day or the day after, but drop everything and go off with this chap who comes along and says, “Follow me.”?

Well, quite simply, it was because it wasn’t completely out of the blue at all. It had been planned some time before. It just appears a sudden decision in how the story is told in today’s passage.

The fishermen had been disciples already of John the Baptist whose main mission was to prepare people for the imminent arrival of the long-awaited Messiah. So when John the Baptist in John 1.29 sees Jesus by the Jordan river and says, “There is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” – the disciples go and meet with Jesus.

In John 1.35 two disciples of John the Baptist go to Jesus to enquire further if he truly is the Messiah. One of these is Andrew – Simon Peter’s brother; the other is unnamed, but possibly John – the brother of James and son of Zebedee we meet in today’s passage. Or the unnamed disciple could have been Philip, also from Bethsaida in Galilee, who went and told Nathanael, who was reputedly from nearby Cana in Galilee (see sermon for last week).

So Jesus has already met at least two of these four fishermen, if not all four of them up at the Jordan where the Baptist has been at work. Even if John and James had not met Jesus by the Jordan, they would have heard all about him from Andrew, Peter, Philip and Nathanael who were all returning to Galilee as they left the Baptist’s entourage. Not only have they changed their allegiance from the Baptist to Jesus, and begun an entirely new life and new project, Simon has even been given a new name by Jesus – he will now be known as Peter the rock (John 1.42).

This is where we pick up the story again in Mark’s Gospel. Back in their home town for a while, they resume their usual employment; they have families, they have obligations; but equally they are waiting for Jesus to come and do exactly what we see him do in Mark 1:14-20 – he comes along one day to collect them up again because, “the time has come” (v15). So, having been waiting for this for some time; they drop everything there and then and follow Jesus.

It’s not the suddenness, or the dramatic nature of deciding to follow Jesus that counts, it’s that when called, you follow. Some of us do have special, even spectacular stories of our conversion moment to tell; but even for those of us with a good story, like these fishermen, there has nearly always been a time of preparation and many influences coming to bear before the dramatic change of heart.

ii

For the disciples, for Jesus himself, a whole new life has begun. Yet this is not just a new beginning for them; it is a new beginning for Israel and ultimately, a new beginning for the whole world.

Jesus was building a community around himself. He chose 12 disciples in all to stand like the 12 tribes of ancient Israel, which had not existed for 700 years by this time, as a new foundation for a New Israel, a new People of God. And Jesus was not numbered among the 12 – he was like God who called the first Israel into being.

The New Israel will no longer be based upon blood and ethnic heritage, but upon whether or not you believe and follow Jesus of Nazareth. He will decide who belongs now to the Kingdom of God – and he will call many who had been deemed unsuitable – sinners, prostitutes, tax collectors, gentiles, Samaritans – and he will exclude many who considered themselves in unassailable positions of privilege among God’s People, such as priests, Sadducees and Pharisees and even Herod the king.

This new world order will grow from tiny beginnings, no bigger than a mustard seed, but from these fishermen will grow a mighty kingdom that spans the globe and bestrides the centuries, like a mighty tree springing from the tiny seed. At times it will grow secretly, like the leaven working silently in the dough, or a seed growing secretly in the ground before it emerges into the light – like the Church grows secretly in places where it is persecuted - or at work silently where it is ignored – such as today’s modern world where the worldwide Methodist family continues to grow by a million people a year, and has done for the last 30 years or more, but it receives no headlines and hears no fanfares.

The disciples are taught the new pilgrim’s prayer, “Give us today our daily bread,” for they would no longer be at home to bake it themselves. Their new life of travelling has begun. They are on a mission that will change them, their nation, and the whole world.

iii

This is good news. God’s Messiah, his only Son, has come into the world as promised long ago. So what is this life of discipleship the fishermen have embarked upon going to be like?

Not easy, is the answer. As fishermen they already knew that fish don’t form an orderly queue to throw themselves into your boat. They knew that fishing takes patience and perseverance and that sometimes the fish get away and all that effort comes to nothing.

Jesus is going to show them that they can be remarkably effective if they follow his instructions, but it’s still not going to be easy: For there are others who want those fish and resent Jesus getting his hands on them.

This is what the story of Jonah is about. Written after the return from Exile in Babylon, it is a humorous caricature of the conservatives of the newly rebuilt Jerusalem.

In Exile, when the Israelites might well have thought God had abandoned them or had been defeated by the mightier gods of Babylon, they suddenly discovered that their God was the only God, even the God of the Babylonians who held them captive. Isaiah of Babylon recognises the Babylonian gods as pieces of carved wood strapped on to the backs of donkeys to stop them falling off into the road; he sees that his God of Israel is the God of all peoples.

Yet when the Israelites finally get back home from Exile, they soon revert to a narrow, self-centred theology. They want to get rid of mixed-race marriages and push out all those dreadful half Jews, as they saw them, the despised Samaritans, who are driven out of Jerusalem and made to go and worship on another mountain.

Jonah is sent by God to go and tell the Ninevites that God loves them and that God wants to save them, if only they will repent. Jonah, as a representative of these narrow-minded types after the Exile, doesn’t want God to love the Ninevites too, he wants to keep God for his sort, so he tries to run away.

Well, you all know the story of Jonah in the whale, but the ending of the story has Jonah sulking outside the city of Ninevah, very angry indeed that God has gone and done exactly what he knew God wanted to do – he has saved the wretched Ninevites from their sins.

Well, in the West we have lived through several generations which have assumed that no one cared two hoots any more about which souls belonged to which god. Since 9/11 we have all had to relearn that fishing for souls is indeed a very dangerous business.

Of these fishermen, both Peter and Andrew were crucified, James was beheaded and John was exiled to Patmos.

We have all come to church this morning assuming we would be safe in the streets and safe whilst in this building – unless an earthquake should disturb us.

But Christians in Iraq, and Pakistan and Niger and Nigeria and many places besides will not be able to make that assumption this morning. Christians in places like communist Russia and at times in China have also known that secular powers also still care about who owns people’s souls. There are all sorts of fishermen out there – be careful who captures your soul!

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