**25th January 2009**

**Mark 1.14-20**

Joan Kingham said she first felt called to give her life to Christ’s work when she attended meetings at the Tab where missionaries from the London missionary society on furlough would share their adventures from the mission field and their voyages on the John Williams ships in the Pacific. They showed slides by magic lanterns – No plasma screens in those days. She said she was inspired by their witness and dedication and stories of trying to share the good news of Jesus in word and deed. But Joan admitted she didn’t have the gumption to be a missionary overseas. But she did realize there was a mission field on her doorstep in cynical and skeptical Britain. She gave herself to that instead, following Jesus mandate to help others find life in all its fullness.

Jesus starts his ministry in our gospel reading from Mark’s gospel today by calling people to change and believe the gospel. The Greek work metanoia ‘repent’, means to change one's mind and direction.

Jesus, of course, never gave a specific definition of the 'good news of the kingdom of God', but he gave plenty of allusions to a new shalom – righteous well-being throughout all of creation – and that it was both for the future and immanently present; the kingdom of God was to come and it was also near, and within. We should both work for it and look forward to it.

In Matthew’s gospel, when John the Baptist is imprisoned he asks if Jesus is the one, the Messiah, the savior. Jesus says go back and tell him what you see and hear: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and good news proclaimed to the poor. Whilst the thief comes to steal, kill and destroy Jesus comes to bring life, life in all its fullness.

Jesus came preaching about the kingdom of God and calling people to change direction and get caught up in this movement. People responded to him. Something about Jesus made people want to follow him.

As Jesus walks by the Sea of Galilee, he sees people going about their everyday work, bringing in the daily catch of fish. In the midst of the ordinary, Jesus calls four fishermen, two sets of brothers, with the words “Follow me.” And *immediately* – a word that Mark uses often to express the urgent need to proclaim the gospel in troubled times, such as those faced by the first readers – Simon and Andrew, James and John leave their boats and their nets and follow. There is no indication in the text about who these four individuals were, if they knew Jesus, or what Jesus saw in them that prompted him to choose them. There is no insight into what they thought as they dropped everything and left their work and their families. Without question, they went with Jesus. What compelled them to go?

Jesus told them that their new work would be fishers of people – go and catch people, men and women. Their work would be to tend to relationships, to care for others, and to invite them to hear the good news that Jesus was proclaiming and work for the kingdom of God – a kingdom of justice and peace. From this time on, everything would be different for these four. He called them not to a life of comfort but a life of service.

Someone said that everyone wants something in which they can invest their life. Jesus called these fishermen to a task in which they would have to spend themselves and burn themselves up for the sake of something greater than their own personal comfort.

Our IBRA notes on 29th December shared a story from a pastor of a Congregational Church in the States, Andy Benson, and how one day a beloved member of his congregation slipped him a note after worship. He considered her one of the living saints, someone who models for him the walk of faithfulness. When he opened the folded paper, he read in his friends’ shaky handwriting the words of the famous sculptor Henry Moore. It had to do with the ‘secret of life’, with devoting yourself entirely to a task that you cannot possibly do. He reminded himself that God calls us to dream bigger than we’ve dreamed before, to give ourselves completely to whatever seems impossibly out of reach, and to trust that God will, again lead us to a better tomorrow.

To go and fish for people is an open ended almost impossible task. But God is about doing the impossible.

Most of our witnessing is likely to happen in passing moments of conversation--those occasions when we show, in relatively minor ways, who we are and to whom we belong. There was a suburban woman who was playing tennis with her good but quite secular friends. In a conversation break between sets she began referring to something she had read that morning. It would have been easy to say, "I read something this morning." Instead, with no attempt at religiosity, she simply introduced one word: "In my devotional reading this morning." It was not a major soul-winning engagement. It was, however, a true sowing of seed. By a word, she had opened the door for some further conversation. She was fishing, looking for a bite, someone to get hooked.

Perhaps our greatest problem in becoming Christ's fishermen is that we are not enough in earnest to grasp the opportunities that come to us; or we are so possessed of the idea that we must say something dramatic and far-reaching that we fail to say the small, immediate and potentially significant thing. To put it in the language of our lesson for the day, most of us really don't act as if we even have a call to "fish." We're out in the waters of human need every day, but we don't seem to know it.

The issue is not that we should become more aggressive about sharing our faith. It is that we should be more sensitive to the needs of the world around us, and more sensitive to the subtle prodding of the Holy Spirit. The two sensitivities are wonderfully intertwined. To be sensitive to the Holy Spirit must mean that we will be more sensitive to people and their pain; to be more sensitive to people ought to make us more open to God and his purposes.

It is interesting that Mark, known for his minimal use of words, draws attention to the disciples' trade six times in five verses! Could it be that their calling to 'fish for people' hung on temperament and experience, first to consider carefully the subjects' known behavior, then to work out a strategy to capture them and finally to take risks to put the strategy into practice – as successful fishermen would have to do. Certainly, many who have experienced a specific call of God on their lives report that knowledge, skills and experience gained in 'a former life' are rarely wasted. And those whose 'call' they would hardly label as such know how the gifts and abilities with which God has blessed them are used daily in the tasks God invites them to do.

Following Jesus means leaving behind past ways of life and embarking on a new adventure. We respond to God’s call, trusting that God supports us with steadfast love. When God calls, what is being asked of us? In what ways do we respond? How can we recognize the one we are to follow?

It is easy for the Church to be preoccupied with maintaining the ordained ministry and servicing the worship and pastoral needs of its congregations. Sometimes we risk neglecting the recognition of the sense of calling to entirely different service that is felt by a large number of our members. Many people feel called to use their gifts in vocations from teaching to medicine to engineering to looking after a family. You can work for the kingdom wherever you are.

The whole movement that Jesus undertook only got under way because some people responded to his call and gave up what they doing for a living and changed direction and followed him.. We are a called people. We are called by Jesus Christ. If the Queen got on the phone to you, you’d drop everything. I know if Joan Kingham asked people to do something they hardly ever said no.

We are called by Jesus Christ. Don’t let anyone devalue the importance and place of the church. Because the church is made up of people who are called by Jesus Christ.

The church needs good leadership. Like any organisation, if you haven’t got good leadership you are not going to get very far. Local churches need motivated and gifted elders and leaders of church organisations, youth and children’s work. Leaders, by definition, make things happen. The church needs to keep on blooding new leaders and renewing leadership lest it becomes stagnant and out of touch.

Someone has said there is a huge difference between having a job at church and having a ministry at church.  
... If you are doing it because no one else will, it's a job.  If you are doing it to serve the Lord, it's a ministry.  
... If you're doing it just well enough to get by, it's a job.  If you're doing it to the best of your ability, it's a ministry.  
... If you'll do it only so long as it doesn't interfere with other activities, it's a job.  If you're committed to staying with it even when it means letting go of other things, it's a ministry.  
... It's hard to get excited about a job.  It's almost impossible not to get excited about a ministry.  
An average church is filled with people doing jobs.  A great church is filled with people involved in ministry.

You see a bigger picture. You are serving Christ. You are part of a bigger work playing your part in his kingdom work.

We can all find reasons for not doing things. ‘I haven’t got the time’ ‘too much like hard work’ and so on. Some people do things too readily without pausing for a moment to consider whether they should be doing it. I wonder what kind of objections Simon and Andrew, James and John made to avoid following Jesus. I wonder what Zebedee, the father of James and John felt when his sons wondered off and left him with the fishing nets?

I was the only member of my extended family to go off to University. My father was hoping my degree would pave the way to a well-paid job. So, he was a bit disconcerted initially when I told him I felt called to be a church minister. By the time I was ordained he had come around to acknowledge that that was who I was.

I had had many changes of direction after leaving university. Initially I didn’t know what to do. The minister of the church I attended in Nottingham said what are you going to do when you leave university? I said I didn’t know and then casually added ‘got any suggestions?’ Well he did! He got some grants in to employ a church community worker and got me working for the church for a year. It was a tremendous experience and gave me opportunity to experience church ministry. I then became unemployed for six months; then went to work in a Pork pie factory; and then worked as a social work assistant for Nottingham Social Services. By then I’d been involved in church life and had had experience leading small groups, taking part in worship, leading a youth club. People were encouraging me to consider becoming a minister but I was trying to avoid it. I didn’t consider it to be a proper job. After all, they only worked one day a week! A friend put me on the spot. Stop hiding behind your objections and prejudices. The question is: ‘is Christ calling you into church ministry?’

I had a nagging feeling that the answer was yes.

But every call has to be tested. People can delude themselves that they are called by Christ, and the church in its wisdom has to help individuals discern that call and confirm it where they discern it is present. And so began six months of candidating for ministry and then four years of training to be a minister. 23 years later I’m still in ministry. Yesterday was the 17th anniversary of my induction to this church and it was poignant for me leading the service of thanksgiving for Joan because every year on the 13th January she would give me a card thanking me for coming to be her minister.

Christ calls us to different things. We have different gifts and different roles. And we all need encouragement to use them for the kingdom of God. Where is Christ calling you?

Will you be part of this great adventure called the kingdom of God, exercising ministry in the name of Jesus, helping people to find life, life in all its fullness?

Let us pray: When Simon and Andrew, James and John heard your call, they knew that suddenly their lives had become different. Your presence called them to a new way of being, which made them ready to give up so very much, to risk so very much. For them, knowing you and being with you made it a step worth taking.Maybe we don't always appreciate so readily the strength and truth of the call that is also addressed to us.  
Perhaps we're more like Jonah, needing several nudges along the way before we see the light.

But thank you, Lord, for not giving up on us, for steadfastly inviting us to listen.  
Help us to hear you more clearly and see your truth better in this passing world,  
that your kingdom may grow in and around us.  
**Amen.**