**24th January 2021**

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Call to worship

The Lord called the disciples to be fishers of men.
He calls us to follow him, to trust in, rely on and have confidence in him.
Come, let us cast our nets into his waters and offer ourselves in worship and praise.
Amen.



Prayers of penitence

Lord, , fear can prevent us from spreading your ‘good news’, or from responding to your call to do something different.

Fear of being unpopular.
Fear of being inadequate.
Fear of having to give up possessions.
Fear of losing people we love.
Fear of losing friendships.
Fear of hard life changes.
Fear of becoming different.

We are sorry, Lord, for giving in to our fears.
We’re sorry for allowing social or family pressures to influence our decisions.
Help us to respond to your call without hesitation.

Help us to lean on you.
Help us to trust in you.
Help us to learn from you.
Help us to follow you.
Help us to spread the good news.
We ask in your powerful name.
Amen.

Assurance of forgiveness

Jesus, you came proclaiming the good news of God,
and endured the cross through love for us.
Through your sacrifice, we are forgiven.
May we share this good news
– so that others will know your loving freedom in their lives.
Amen.

The Lord’s Prayer

**Mark 1.14-20**

Fishing. I’ve never been fishing. Apart from one experience of going deep sea fishing as a workplace team building day. To be honest I spent most the time seasick rather than fishing. I didn’t catch anything.

Fishing has been in the news recently as fishermen staged protest outside Parliament this week angry at the Brexit deal. Many had voted for us to leave Europe but now the reality has come home they are not happy with the new deal.

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?

We are not given any details in the gospel about those who may have said no to Jesus. ‘I’m not following you, you’re mad, deluded. I’m not following you I’ve got a job to do – I’m fishing, earning my keep, feeding the family, can’t be distracted from your flights of fancy. Get real. I’m not following you because no one else is. You’re not cool, it would damage my image. What’s in it for me? Is it going to bring me health wealth and happiness? I don’t trust you – you’ll make my life boring - I don’t like people telling me what to do.

You might hear in those response some of the common objections to people following Jesus today. As a church minister I’ve heard them all.

There are accounts in the gospels of people refusing the invitation to follow Jesus, for example the rich young man – who was more in love with his money than he was with the idea of following Jesus. But here we have four fishermen dropping their nest and responding to the call of Christ.

What compelled them and what would compel you? Why would you be willing to follow Jesus.

Here’s some thoughts.

Jesus says ‘Come’. It is an invitation. Its not forcing you against your will. It’s not manipulating you nor tricking you into discipleship.

Some churches some preachers believe in bringing people to a crisis point of decision. They try to convince people they are sinners who need saving. They try to make you feel guilty, so you come begging for forgiveness. They may make you fearful about going to hell if you don’t decide for Christ. They may say what will happen if you die? All those approaches are open to the accusation of manipulation and get the Christian church a bad press.

Here’s the thing – Jesus doesn’t use that approach when he invites people to follow him. He doesn’t scare people into following him. Neither should we. That’s not to say some people do feel guilty, or unworthy. Some people are anxious and frightened about life, about death. The scriptures talk about finding God’s perfect love that cats out fear. Jesus says ‘Come’ discover the unconditional love of God for you. That will change you – for the better – but the change will come through love, not fear or manipulation.

Sometimes people refuse the invitation because they fear that Jesus will close down their options for life and make them dull and boring, as if they have to choose between God and anything else they enjoy, anything that may be a rival to God. In the film The Lady in the Van, the playwright Alan Bennett agrees to let an eccentric old lady called Mary Shepherd park her van in his drive for a few days. She stays fifteen years. She also turns out to be a gifted musician, daughter of a famous cellist, who had once been in a convent. The problem was that in that covenant music was strictly forbidden, as it was seen as a distraction from God. It was either God or music. – you couldn’t have both.

Many people suspect that God if he exists at all is out to stop any fun and we have to choose between him and things we enjoy in case it becomes a threat to God. They shouldn’t be in competition. God’s presence brings out the goodness in all things – God is not a rival to them. That doesn’t mean there aren’t choices to make about what is good and life giving, and what is destructive and harmful, habits to avoid and priorities to fix, but God created life and said it was good.

Jesus didn’t tell the fishermen to stop fishing. Work is important – for some it is a means to an end – it pays the bills and puts food on the table, for others their career can stretch them and fulfil them. For others, their work is their vocation, their life’s calling – following Jesus doesn’t stop you from fishing.

But following Jesus enhances the fishing, brings deeper fulfilment and purpose. You’re not just fishing. You are now fishing for people.

I know when I was at the tender age of 16, I felt the call of Christ on my life and my first objection was that it would turn me into the people I knew went to church, namely old ladies, who wore hats. I’ve nothing against old ladies who wear hats, but at the age of 16 this wasn’t cool. Christianity, I thought would blight my life, stop me having fun. I wanted to meet girls, drive flashy cars, visit the world, not be stuck in a cold drafty church and manning jumble sales – because that’s what I thought it meant to be a Christian. I was so wrong. I was bounced into the Christian faith mainly through fear. An evangelist felt my collar and said what if I didn’t accept Jesus and got run over by a bus. Would I be sure that I was going to heaven? Make the decision. A couple of years of Holy Spirit therapy shed the love of God into my heart eventually.

The death question is there. This pandemic has raised people’s anxieties and made us all more aware of our mortality and frailty. The Christian faith does proclaim that Jesus has won the victory over sin and death. The resurrection is the cornerstone of the faith and if you’re a thinking person Id encourage you to consider the evidence. If it happened, it is arguably the most important event in human history, because it offers us a new history for the future and those whom we love.

Most people like to back winners. I know I support Burnley football club and more often than not we lose. But miracles do happen. You didn’t really think I could pass up the opportunity for mentioning our famous victory at Liverpool this week: the first team to win at Anfield in four years! And people say there isn’t a God!

At the age of 16 I wanted to back a winner – and Jesus’s victory over the grave suggested to me that ultimately, we would be on the winning side if we followed him.

But there is more than just booking your ticket in heaven. Jesus called those fishermen to follow him. He calls us to follow him. Follow in the footsteps of Jesus.

What a tremendous challenge and adventure. To follow the way of Jesus, to carry on doing the things Jesus did: To befriend the downcast and lonely, to reach out to the excluded and marginalised, to work for reconciliation and peace, to challenge injustice, to help the poor, comfort those who mourn, pray for those who are sick and deliver people form evil. What an adventure. Are you up for it?

Don’t tell me following Jesus is boring. It isn’t. I’ve done it for nearly forty years, and it is the trip of a lifetime. Its costly. Its challenging. Its uncomfortable at times. It is also thrilling, energising, risk taking and fulfilling.

Come follow me. The ‘me’ bit is the all-important clincher. Who are you following? Leadership is vital. This week we saw the inauguration of a new President of the United State, Joe Biden. There is a long way to go and many testing days ahead to evaluate him as a leader. But the tone and expectation and mood on Wednesday was so far from the acrimonious divisive lies of Donald Trump. One person interviewed about what the inauguration meant said that he could now tell his young children that it matters about telling the truth, it matters about character, it matters about dignity, it matters about respect. We can only pray that will be the case for this new President.

It matters who you are following. We all follow someone or something. Some of the most inspiring people I know follow Jesus. From the heroes of faith, the Martin Luther kings, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Mother Teresa, the William Wilberforce’s, to the heroes down at my local church. When I was young some of those church members would sacrifice their time and energy to run a youth club so the likes of someone like me had somewhere to go. We gave them a hard time, but they just loved us unconditionally. Sure, they wanted us to find Jesus for ourselves and they didn’t apologise for their faith. Their faith was the reason why they went out of their way to open up that youth club – but their humble, loving service inspired me. It still does when I see so many faithful Christian people giving of their time and money to do God’s work in the places God has put them.

They do it because they follow a great leader who inspires them and is someone they can depend on. When Jesus says Come follow me – it’s a call into co-operation in God’s work in this world. The Lord goes with us, through his Spirit.

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.

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. In this week of prayer for Christian unity we give thanks for all churches in their various shapes and sizes, all part of God’s glorious diversity. We get things wrong. We get things right. But we always need to be focussed on not following ourselves – but following the one who calls us – Come follow me and Ill make you more than fishermen. Fish for people, change the world.

Will you be part of this great adventure? Will you come and follow?

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.

But thank you, Lord, for not giving up on us, for steadfastly inviting us to follow.
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.**

**Sending Out**

Loving Lord,
thank you that you meet us where we are,
in the middle and muddle of our daily lives.
Help us to hear your call,
to recognise your voice,
and to respond to your invitation
to follow you whatever we might be doing.
**Amen.**