Luke 5: 1:11 Epiphany 5

I wonder if any of you saw Netflix’s big film release this New Year? It’s called Don’t look up and it casts Meryl Streep as the American President in a time of great calamity. A comet the size of Mount Everest is hurtling towards earth and will make contact in six months’ time. But it isn’t the expected plot where a daring astronaut is sent up in a rocket to divert the path of this planet-killer. Because the comet isn’t the focus, the film wants to explore, how do we react to this news? Do we deny it and stick to what we know rather like the orchestra playing as the Titanic sinks? Do we see people’s fear as something to exploit, an opportunity to boost our popularity perhaps or to make a profit? OR do we face up to an alarming reality, dig deep and leave behind the comfort of what we know for an unknown future?

Today’s reading from Luke could be a film plot too. We start with the wide-angled lens, the shores of the Sea of Galilee, a large crowd pressing in on a single, charismatic speaker. Pressing in so much so that in fact for his own safety and to create some order, the speaker asks Simon, the owner of a boat if he would mind just taking him a little way from the shore so he can speak to everyone in peace.

It’s Simon’s workplace, it must have been quite something to have this local celebrity come and speak in your own backyard as it were. Perhaps Simon was irritated at first by all the fuss disrupting his usual routine, or cynical, or dismissive. I can’t speak for him but certainly those are the kind of reactions I had when I first started to explore who this Jesus guy was, or more accurately, explore the Church and traditions that have grown up around him. We are invited to respond – and what does Simon do? Simon agrees to push out a little way and as Jesus finishes addressing the crowds the camera zooms in for a close up on the dialogue between this prophetic speaker and the everyday fisherman. And Jesus asks him to do something crazy, something nonsensical, against Simon’s experience, against his instincts - push out into the lake, take the nets designed for night-time fishing and drop them in the deep water for a daytime catch. What would you do? Only Simon has heard something, experienced something in this encounter which stops him telling this interloper to take a hike. Instead, in his own boat he addresses Jesus as master, effectively giving him command over the boat. ‘Master, we have worked all night long, but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.’ Master, we have worked so hard, we have learned our craft from the elders, we have faithfully cleaned these nets, looked after our boats, we have the calloused hands and the scars to show for it, we have watched the seasons come and go and you are telling me to drop these nets now? Ok.

Ok. Would we say that? It’s easy for us to disconnect from this story, many of us have heard it countless times, we can tend to make it the stuff of fables and not the stuff of an everyday person going about their everyday life and encountering God who asks us to do something different. It is preposterous, why would the creator of the world, the all-seeing God almighty, step into my house, my work, my garden, my very being and ask me to join in? The incomprehensible truth is that God wants to partner with us, with all of us, God wants to work with us and through us and yes, often, despite us, to make this world a place of healing, hope and reconciliation. And we have to decide like Simon, how we are going to respond. Are we going to say, look it sounds great n all but this is the time of day when we traditionally clean our nets. I know what I know, I don’t want to be disrupted. It made me smile to look at this passage again and to see how Jesus at first only asks Simon to go out a little way. Only after a while does he then ask Simon to push out into the deep water. Does that ring any bells with involvement in church life or indeed in your faith life?! I remember when I first started going to church as a very hesitant mid-20 something and on my second time the captain of the belltower asked me if I was interested in becoming a bellringer – it was too much too soon and he had no idea about my lack of rhythm and inability to count. I imagine God knows that the deep water is too much straight off for most of us. The key is to not fall into believing that the shallows are where God wants us to stay.

I would urge all of us contrary to the Netflix hit film, do look up, look around, look inside you, listen to where God is calling you. It’s easy to continue on the same path for a sense of reassurance, but God is where the true reassurance is. If it’s not quite a planet-killing comet heading for earth, the climate crisis and the pandemic have opened our eyes to our vulnerability in a way we couldn’t see before and the truth that God sustains and cares in ways we tend to overlook because we were doing quite nicely on our own terms thank you.

Closer to home the traditional churches across Britain are in clear decline in terms of numbers attending. Each year retired URC minister Martin Camroux analyses attendance data and Simon circulates it among elders. This year Martin wrote: Since I started this survey in 1975 this has been the most difficult, indeed the most painful, to write. There is no escaping the grim reality of this year’s statistics. Membership is down by over 7% to 40,024 – the worst decline I can remember.’ And just in case we weren’t clear about what that means he added we are ‘in a state of near collapse as a Church’. And this isn’t just the URC, the Methodists and the Church of England are currently on the same path.

In Don’t Look Up we see the human tendency to continue doing what we know even if it will lead to our demise, to not choose life because change is more disturbing than the threat facing us. And after the nets draw up this impossibly huge catch of fish as a sign of an extravagantly fruitful and extraordinary but unpredictable life with Jesus, Simon tries to put distance between him and his passenger. ‘Go away from me Lord for I am sinful!’. The miracle of the catch of fish which never should have been possible in the night let alone in the day shines a light into Simon’s life which I imagine both draws him in and yet wants to send him running for the hills. Only here he is, in this boat, he only started by pushing out a little and now everything has changed and he has to confront the reality that he warts and all, foibles, failings, shortcomings, limitations is being invited to respond to God’s work in this world.

Next month on March 20th we will have a Church meeting and our Tab AGM when we will have the opportunity to hear about a new focus drawn up by the elders to help address some of the challenges we face and the opportunities we have which have been thrown up by the pandemic, a less-resourced URC and our age profile as a church. I would encourage you to go, to read the papers, to hear and add your voice to the discussions as we discern our way together.

Jesus said to Simon – Do not be afraid and I want us to hear that. God is faithful and ever creating. Around the world, God’s love and peace and purpose is being experienced by over 2 billion Christians and the church is growing, particularly in Africa. Within the UK, there are also denominations which are full of life and growing. I don’t want to steal the elders’ thunder when it comes to the church meeting but we here at the Tab in partnership with others are connecting with people at different stages of life in new and exciting ways. But let’s be clear our primary calling is not to build the most successful church ever although if we do then fabulous, but to follow God to discern, to push out into whatever waters God leads us into so that we can be fruitful in God’s name. Following the miracle and this overwhelming experience of Jesus’ power the way Simon addresses Jesus in the boat moves from master to Lord. What would it mean if we truly do that, switch from Jesus being master, an influential leader to the one whom we recognise as Lord, as creator, source of life and hope, to whom we dedicate our hearts and lives, body and soul?

At the end of today’s passage Jesus ends by saying ‘From now on’ and commissions Simon as a disciple. Can we be so transformed by our encounters with Jesus that we look up and say ‘from now on, Lord’?