

Matthew 4.12-24

Sermon

Have you ever invited a friend to church? Or to a Christian event, say an Alpha Course. It can be a nervy thing let's be honest. You can be worried they will think you are a religious fanatic. We all try to avoid people who know they have the truth and think they are right. We don't want to be classed in that number. We don't want to force our beliefs on another person. We well know all the reasons and barriers people have against considering Christianity and we don't want to start an argument -especially an argument that we are not sure how to say what we believe, and even worse may be anxious that they will talk us out of faith and plant the seeds of doubt in our mind. So best keep quiet. Anyway, they will say 'no they are not interested' anyway.

When I first arrived at University at the end of fresher's week the Christian Union had a big evangelistic meeting. I was getting ready to go out to it when the guy in the flat opposite me said 'where are you going?' I said 'oh I'm just off out.'

'Out where. '

'I'm going to a meeting'

'What sort of meeting?'

'A big meeting - to hear a speaker – lecture kind of thing'

'O what's it on?'

'Well, err - the Christian faith' – I said coughing

'Well I'm not doing anything he said. Can I come with you?'

'Err, well - are you sure – it might not be your cup of tea.'

'Let me be the judge of that' he said.

Mike came along to that meeting and accepted the invitation to receive Christ into his life at the end of the meeting. I was utterly gob smacked. He left university in his first year to go and help in inner city London. He wanted to get involved with the poor. He then felt he should devote his life to working with the world's poor and went back to University – this time at Birmingham –to study development issues. Then went out to India.

Never underestimate what God can do with our pathetic attempts at witnessing to the gospel.

As we enter this text, we meet Jesus as he begins to preach and gather disciples. Choosing to follow in the way of God was the call of the prophets. It was the heart of John's message before his arrest. Now the call to change directions and journey in God's ways becomes Jesus' message. Matthew points to Jesus as the fulfilment of the words in Isaiah 9:1–2. – a light shining in the darkness. Jesus calls the crowds to repent, for God's reign is near. This call to repent is a call to change – to turn one's life in a new direction.

The call of the disciples in verses 18–22 seems abrupt. It may be helpful to note that the writer of Matthew relates significant events in the story of Jesus without necessarily indicating the passage of time. Jesus speaks and the fishermen respond. These brothers change the direction in their lives and follow.

Within this one passage, all the elements of Jesus' earthly ministry are included: proclaiming the presence of God's reign, teaching, healing, and calling disciples.

Come follow me and I will make you fish for people! At once they dropped their nets and followed him. Sounds easy doesn't it? Why can't people react like that to us?

Well break it down. Jesus took advantage of the circumstances that these fishermen found themselves in – they were fishing, so He intriguingly used fishing as an analogy for God which aroused their curiosity. After which he embodied his message slowly at a pace they could take it in as they observed Jesus' life, teaching and healing.

When I was a social worker I remember one day we were in the office at the end of a very stressful day. Myself and some of my colleagues had been involved in a difficult case and we were all exhausted and strained. One of my colleagues, Linda, asked me if I was OK and how was I going to cope with the stress.

I said instinctively what I would honestly do, 'I'll have a hot bath and I'll pray'.

Immediately she was curious about the role of prayer in my life. Do you find prayer helpful? How do you pray? Does God answer your prayers etc?

Maybe because I was stressed I hadn't put up my usual inhibitions about sharing my faith. I had just responded to her innocent question honestly and instinctively. I've had to learn over the years not to be defensive nor apologetic for the richness and the

blessing I feel I have in being a Christian. So long as you don't come over all sanctimonious and holier than thou, and you are real, people will, I've found, more often than not, be fascinated by your faith and experience.

We have swallowed hook line and sinker, the attitude that one shouldn't talk about religion because no-one is interested. Well they may not be that interested in you going on about church and institutional religion but I bet they are interested in how your faith helps you cope with life, how you deal with stress, where you find happiness and hope, cope with guilt, offer forgiveness, choose between right and wrong.

When we listen and get to know other people, we'll come across natural opportunities to allow spiritual topics to flavour our conversation.

Not so long ago I was speaking to someone who was bemoaning the fact that there is no sense of community today. No one cares for anybody else. No-one looks out for you. We are all alone in society. I agreed to some extent. I said yes we all live very individual lives and often don't know who our neighbour is. But then I added 'I'm just glad I belong to a church'. I left it at that and allowed this person to take me up on the point. They did. They took the bait. They went on to ask 'why am I glad to belong to a church?' and having asked me the question I had permission to answer knowing that I would have their attention because they asked the question.

I was not being manipulative. I was being honest. I'm extremely grateful for the church. Despite all its faults and failings it is a place where we are committed to look after each other, sometimes admittedly clumsily. But we do stand against the tide of our self obsessed individualised society. And I am happy to tell others of that treasure.

The stuff of our lives, the experiences of our lives, will be the stuff that God can use. When you have been through adversity how did your faith help. When you have been low did your faith bring you through? Can you say a word about that when someone shares with you a problem and then asks you what can they do? Where can they get help?

I know a business executive who when asked the question 'How's your year going?' will sometimes reply 'My business life is going really well, my family life is doing OK and my spiritual life is struggling. Which one do you want to talk about?

The person will normally reply 'well, uh, tell me about your business life'. But a signal has been sent out that could set the stage for a future spiritual conversation.

We make split second decisions all the time to either play it safe or just be honest about what makes us truly tick. Friends, may I encourage you to be bold enough to be more honest about your faith and not be afraid of turning routine conversations to spiritual ones. Come and we can fish for people...

Then there is something invitational about Jesus approach. Come, follow me...'
Elsewhere in the gospels Jesus says 'come and see...'

Its an invitation to come and make your own mind up.

I remember talking to someone once about the Christmas story. They said they like the Christmas story but it's only a story. I said do you remember the bit about the shepherds. When they were told the birth of Jesus by the angels they heard the news but they didn't stop there. They went to check it out for themselves. Would you be willing to do the same - to check it out for yourself.

You see you can describe people as being in one of three camps. Camp A consists of people who have found God

Camp B consists of people who are seeking God and open to discovering whether God is there.

Camp C is for people who aren't seeking God. There is no advantage in being in Camp C. Unless God does something dramatic like zap St Paul on the road to Damascus Camp C is a dead end. It is a place populated by close minded people. No one likes to be called close minded – some one who refuses to seek after truth. So encourage people to pull up their stakes and move from Camp C to camp B. There clearly is some evidence supporting Christianity and therefore a full-blown search of that is warranted before you dismiss it.

The sceptics prayer goes something along the following lines: 'God I'm not sure You even exist. But if you do, I really want to know you. Please reveal yourself to me. I sincerely want to know the truth about you. Put people in my life. Put books and media in my path, use whatever means you want to help me discover if you are there.' Then encourage them to do some homework like come on an Alpha Course....

We all need to work out our faith – what is our good news – do we really believe it. And sometimes when you are engaged in genuine debate it will make you think through things as much as the person you're trying to convince.

Whilst at university I met up with one of my lecturers in the bar (back in the pub again – it helps men to feel relaxed) and we got into a heated argument. At one point he challenged me and said if he didn't believe what I believed would that mean he was going to hell. I said yes I believed it would mean he was going to hell. (Imagine telling you lecturer he was going to hell - bang goes my grades!) He replied by saying that I was talking about a God of love and the supposedly 'good news' about Jesus. Yet there is an undertone of menace and threat about it. Would God really damn him because he couldn't believe everything I believed? Was salvation all about ticking the right boxes, signing the pledge? His conversation with me sent me away to think deeply about fear and punishment and salvation. I'm still thinking about those things. My faith is evolving and changing as I reflect on my experience, how I see life and God and how I read and re-read the scriptures.

Engaging in the business of sharing your faith, genuinely and openly, will change you as you work through the questions and the doubts people raise. All I can say is don't be afraid – as Peter says 'set apart Christ as Lord in your hearts and work out your reasons' 1 Peter 3.15. Have the courage to believe that all truth is God's truth and have the integrity to go where the Spirit leads you.

I had an atheist friend at university who was constantly challenging me, asking me questions, provoking my beliefs. Yet he did so because he was pursuing truth. If you have friends like that, embrace them – they are wonderful.

This friend eventually became a Christian. He thought his way there because he was primarily a thinker. But he also needed to be open emotionally and spiritually to make a step of commitment and faith. We had gone through many questions – he could see reasons for faith. At one point I was getting tired of all the procrastinating. How many more questions have you got? When will you be satisfied? You have surely got enough to go on. And I challenged him with Anselm's dictum that 'I believe in order that I can understand. Can you see enough to make a step of faith, which is not a blind leap of faith; but real understanding (and ultimately, we will never understand Christianity without the Holy Spirit enlightening our eyes) real understanding often only follows faith.

Fortunately, the challenge to him came at the right point when he was willing to make that step of faith. Hearts and minds are involved in conversion. Conversely, it is difficult to worship someone if your mind or heart has rejected them.

We can't argue people into faith, but we can help them in the process by responding to their questions and providing reasons that there might be something about Christianity for them.

Many people will throw intellectual barriers to avoid pursuing the truth and get you off their case – they throw them up to protect themselves against having to change their views and beliefs. The worse sorts are the apathetic ones who couldn't really care. Sometimes the supposedly intellectual barriers are just a smoke screen because they know the moral cost of following Christ would be too much for them.

I knew someone who enjoyed having sex with women. As many women as possible! It was his hobby to go out at night and try to return home to his flat with a woman. Yet, as often is the case, he was also spiritually open. There is often a close link between sexuality and spirituality: both are seeking intimacy and love, meaning and purpose and it is no surprise that Jesus had more openness from the prostitutes and adulterers and the sexually promiscuous of his society than he did from the religious ones who thought they led moral lives.

This friend would talk with me at length about faith and God. He believed: but he wasn't prepared to change his lifestyle. He preferred to stay with the transitory pleasure of sexual liaisons rather than go searching for the love of God. I don't know where he is now. But I can only hope he is one of the Prodigal's who are determined to wander off to the far country to do their own thing, to seek their own pleasure, and hopefully when they have had their fill, and realise it doesn't truly satisfy them, God brings them to their senses and they come home to God's welcome.

But finally the invitation is not just to believe – but it is to follow. It's the invitation to a journey, an adventure. Following in the way of Jesus.

Eugene Peterson put it this way. *The word 'christian' means different things to different people. To one person it means a stiff, upright, inflexible way of life, colourless and*

unbending. To another it means a risky surprise filled venture lived tiptoe at the edge of expectation. If we get our information from the biblical material there is no doubt that the Christian life is dancing, leaping daring life.

It changes your identity and what you are living for. Come follow me and I will make you fish for people.

This prayer by Susan Durber, was in the URC Prayer Handbook this week.

O God, you have gathered us here,
And we have come to follow your call.

We gladly fall into your arms of love
As you offer us mercy, acceptance and welcome

We set down, for this time,
The nets we mend each day,
The work we do in this world,
And the responsibilities that we hold.

For your call to us is clear, catching our breath,
Disturbing our lives and opening new paths.

Let this be a time when we are made new,
And we find again the vocation you have given each one.

And, though we are not the saints we imagine you want,
Give us, we pray, your Spirit
To heal, mend and restore us,
That we may catch your good news and share it with a hungry world.