

## Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2023 – 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Epiphany

### Holmbury St. Mary

Readings: 1 Corinthians 1.10–18 & Matthew 4.12–23

#### Prayer

Lord, help me to speak your truth, and help each of us to hear what you have to say to us today.

Amen.

#### The Simplicity of Jesus' message

We love to make things complicated. Long erudite prayers. Lofty eloquent hymns. Ceremonies, rituals, bewildering lectionaries and of course flowing robes for those out the front.

But what is striking about the early part of Jesus' ministry was its simplicity. Mathew sums up his message in just one sentence: *Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.*

And how about the recruiting of the first disciples? No detailed arguments or impassioned stirring appeals, just eleven words of invitation: *Come, follow me and I will make you fishers of men.*

So let's spend a little time thinking about these two little sentences that Matthew uses to summarise Jesus' early ministry.

#### ***Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near***

Jesus told people that they needed to turn their lives around.

Jesus has a unique power, that I don't think you can find anywhere else. He can transform people, and change the whole direction of their lives. In our new Testament reading Paul talks about the *power of the cross* which I think is the same power to fundamentally renew broken lives.

In my teenage years, I had times of doubting. Was my faith really true, or was I wasting my time and missing out on a fun-filled life by trying to be a Christian? One of the things that convinced me that Jesus was real, and that following

him was the best and only way to go, was reading stories of people whose lives had been changed through the gospel.

- Nicky Cruz – leader of the notorious Mau Mau gang in New York, who turned to Christ and became an evangelist
- Brother Andrew who changed from self-interested unbeliever, to go all-out for Jesus, smuggling bibles through the Iron Curtain, at great personal risk.
- Fred Lemon, a violent criminal serving time in Dartmoor prison, who met Jesus one night in his cell, and became a much-loved speaker and minister to prisoners up and down the country.

These people had all undergone amazing and dramatic transformations in their lives, for which I could find no natural explanation. They had no reason to lie about their experiences, so the only conclusion was that God had stepped in to turn them around. How else could sworn enemies become like brothers or those who had ridiculed or persecuted people of faith become Christianity's most powerful advocates?

Later my faith was bolstered as I read the biographies of people like Chuck Colson and CS Lewis, and going back in time St. Augustine, John Newton and many others. In the Bible Peter, Nicodemus and of course Paul all had powerful experiences with Jesus that led to a complete change of direction.

Hardly any of these people talk about the arguments that convinced them to follow Christ. Even in cases like CS Lewis, where there was an intellectual struggle, that was only one of the factors that finally led to change. For many people, it wasn't an argument or long sell, but the simplest appeal that had been effective. Jackie Pullinger bought a one way ticket on a ship sailing around the world, and ended up in Hong Kong. To start with, about the only phrase that she knew in Chinese was, "God loves you" and so she said that to everyone she met. Amazingly, drug addicts used to respond to these words and come to faith.

### **Why did Jesus tell people to repent?**

Jesus said, *Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near.* God is close, you can't stay where you are, you need to change.

For humans our natural state seems to be heading away from God. We have an internal compass that points us towards God – we know the right way to go, but we persist in heading off in the wrong direction.

Jesus calls us to turn around and go the other way: towards God. He called the least expected people: fishermen, tax collectors, prostitutes and criminals. God doesn't worry about the state of our lives, or how imperfect we are. It is not so much about where we *are* right now, but where *we are headed*.

The story of the prodigal son is a beautiful picture of this. The younger son rebelled, and reached the very depths of deprivation and degradation, before turning back to his father. But when he did so, he discovered this amazing thing – GRACE. His father still loved him, despite everything he had done. The father was longing and looking for his return – but never forced his love on him. The son had to take the first step, but then he was welcomed back with open arms, a ring, a robe and a feast.

No matter who we are, the first step is always turning towards God, which the Bible calls repentance. As long as we think we are fine, we cannot know God, and he cannot help us. When we turn towards him, this amazing grace can start to flow into our lives.

### **We're not all the same**

Some people make dramatic turnarounds: one minute they are far from God, the next they are on their knees reaching out to him. But that may not be your experience.

For most people, things are more gradual. When I first started using a sat nav, whenever I took a wrong road it would tell me, 'make a U-turn'. Now I think Mrs. Google doesn't think that is very safe, she doesn't tell me that I have gone wrong. Instead she takes me round in a long route till I am back that the point I went wrong. For many people repentance is like following a long roundabout route, rather than a violent U-turn. Although amazing conversion stories are inspiring and encouraging, they are not the norm. But the resultant faith can be equally vital.

The important thing is to examine our hearts and ask whether we are seeking God, or serving ourselves. What is our heart's chief desire? If we cannot say that we love God with all our heart, all our strength, and all of our mind, then we need to turn again towards God – whether for the first time or the millionth. The way back is always open, no matter how far we have strayed.

## ***Come, follow me and I will make you fishers of men***

St. Paul was someone with great learning, and he didn't mind engaging in intellectual debate with Jewish teachers or highbrow Greeks, but he tells the Corinthian church that Christ sent him to preach the gospel, but *not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.*

In the following chapter he says that when he first visited them, *My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.*

I think we all, and I include myself very much here, believe that we need to be able to marshall strong intellectual arguments and answer hard questions if we are to be fishers of men, and to persuade people to follow Christ.

But Paul seems to be saying that the reverse is true. Dressing up the message takes the focus away from **Jesus Christ crucified**. Instead the spotlight shifts onto us: our intellect and our arguments. When we falter, as we are almost bound to do, people turn away in derision. Even if we succeed in persuading people to believe, there is a risk that their faith will not have a true foundation. Paul didn't want people's faith to rest on men's wisdom but on God's power. The power of the cross is the only thing that can truly change lives.

Remember: Peter, Andrew, James and John weren't wily anglers trying to catch fish with hooks, by cunning and guile. They simply threw their nets into the water, and pulled in the catch. When they fished where Jesus told them to, the harvest was enormous.

To be fishers of men doesn't require any special abilities or knowledge. It means deciding not to rely on ourselves, but instead to rely on Jesus. He alone has the power to change lives.

## ***Conclusion***

Jesus didn't ask people to join a new religion, or to become religious. Religion, I think, is not the same as following Jesus. It is a set of rules and ceremonies designed to help point us towards God. But rules are never enough. All religions have rule books, rituals and other things designed to be helpful, but we aren't very good at keeping to these, and even if we do, what God really wants is our hearts, not a head-based following of rules.

Jesus says simply, *Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near. And then, Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.*

It seems that repentance was the main theme of Jesus early ministry. And to those who responded the next step was to follow him and share his work of calling others to repent.

This passage encourages me to do two things.

- 1) Examine myself. Again and again. Daily, hourly even. Don't waste any time running in the wrong direction. Turn back and keep myself pointed towards him.
- 2) Ask how can I be a fisher of men? It's not something I have ever found natural or easy. It isn't about convincing people by intellectual argument – but telling them they need to change. In many ways that sounds even more daunting. But the job is not ours. He is the master fisherman, and we just need to cast the nets where he tells us to.

### **Prayer**

Lord Jesus, as you called those early disciples to leave what they were doing and follow you, help us to hear your call today. Change us in our inner beings and help us to follow you whole heartedly, and become your hands, your feet and your voice to the people around us.

Amen.

The New Testament Reading is from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, Chapter 1 verses 10 to 18.

I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no division among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought. My brothers, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; and another, "I follow Cephas"; still another, "I follow Christ."

Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul? I am thankful that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, so no-one can say that you were baptized into my name. (Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanus, beyond that, I don't remember if I baptized anyone else.) For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel – not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

*This is the word of the Lord*

**Thanks be to God.**

Hear the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, according to Mathew.

**Glory to you Lord**

Matthew 4.12–23

When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he returned to Galilee. Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali – to fulfil what was said through the prophet Isaiah:

*“Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the way to the sea, along the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles – the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.”*

From that time on Jesus began to preach, “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near”.

As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will make you fishers of men.” At once they left their nets and followed him.

Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

This is the Gospel of the Lord

**Praise to you, O Christ.**