

Jesus' Call: Good News Not Bad

Sermon for the 3rd Sunday of Epiphany, Year B, 21 January 2018

St Phillip's Anglican Church, O'Connor, ACT

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Jonah 3: 1-10; Psalm 62: 5-12; 1 Corinthians 7: 29-31; Mark 1: 14-20

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

We don't tend to hear fire and brimstone sermons any more—and what would be the point; no-one would take them seriously anyway! In John Wesley's day people in church would beat their heads on the pillars in grief as the great preacher described the fires of hell awaiting the unrepentant, but today's hearers would be politely bemused if not plainly embarrassed. As for being called from the pulpit to lives of greater commitment and discipleship, this might awaken a vague sense of something lacking perhaps, but not much more. We Anglicans weren't brought up to think of our lives in terms of radical discipleship. Dietrich Bonhoeffer famously said that when Jesus Christ calls a person, he calls them to die, and that's still true in

some parts of the world. But not typically for Australian Anglicans, despite all the official rhetoric about mission and evangelism.

Yet today, friends, our readings do indeed deliver a solid call to repentance, conversion and discipleship. They challenge us to let go of our old lives, in order to embrace our baptismal calling as followers of Christ and agents of his joyful good news for a broken world, as our beautiful collect summed it up earlier. But what does that actually mean?

Well, in the book of Jonah today we see a whole community in the grip of God's call to repentance: officially mandated, ritually applied, with the hessian sackcloth of mourning applied to everyone and everything living. Fr James Alison called this the campest scene in the whole Old Testament, and it is funny to imagine putting a hessian bag on my niece's completely bonkers fox terrier. The point in Jonah of course is God's great love for the people of Nineveh. God wants them to choose life and change their ways, whereas God's snooty and disapproving prophet, Jonah, resents God's offer of

forgiveness and, having tried to avoid his mission, Jonah later goes off to sulk. Yet God loves God's people more than the pundits it would seem, which is good news, putting repentance and the call to discipleship in a positive light.

So, friends, God's call to ongoing conversion is good news, not bad news. It's not an invitation to Freudian repression, which leads to all sorts of psychological ill-health, as everyone knows in our era when the only self-indulgence we're forbidden is whatever it is that the diet industry currently wants us to obsess about. No, God's good news calls us to conversion for the sake of joy and freedom in life; in the words of our psalm earlier, "In God is my deliverance and my honour; the rock of my strength and my place of refuge".

Hence the call to repentance and holiness isn't what we might think. It's not a big 'No' to everything familiar, enjoyable and life-giving for the sake of a fake, pious, brittle, emotionally-stunted sort of life. William Blake complained that "priests in black gowns were walking their rounds/and binding with briars my joys and desires".

Billy Joel sang that he'd "rather laugh with the sinners than cry with the saints". Well, we all know what they meant. But, friends, I'd rather laugh with the saints! And I want to be one of those priests in black gowns who point in a different direction—who help people to find life and laughter and freedom and celebration, precisely because they know Jesus Christ and the life-changing joy of his Gospel. And this is what we see in today's marvellous Gospel passage, in which James and John are called to discipleship, leaving their ancestral livelihood as fishermen.

Today's gospel is certainly a confronting story, especially for hearers in any sort of a traditional society. Indeed, in our own European past, people were still given names like Fisher, or Baker, or Miller, or Carpenter, or Cooper, or Farmer, so that who you were was tied to your ancestral livelihood. But in today's Gospel, these Fisher boys move on in life and become the Jesus boys. They leave their traditional livelihood, and their family businesses, one of which was obviously a going concern with the father's boat full of hired

men. Instead they become a bunch of nobodies, and disreputable nobodies at that, joining an itinerant preacher, with his gang of odd bods, women and God knows who else. And of course, friends, that's just what we're doing here today. We were taken from the arms of our parents at our baptism, when the electric charge of resurrection was first put through us, and here we are still, as Jesus boys, as Jesus girls, in this distinctly odd company of people. And despite our Anglican instinct to make everything to do with Christianity seem respectable, today's wider society isn't fooled: everybody knows these days that church and church people are definitely weird, and there's no escaping it.

But the main point I want to make about today's Gospel is that the mood is joyful, and Jesus is being playful. It's a very blokey scene too, with a challenge to those four lads worthy of a recruiting poster, with its promise of adventure, but more ironic: "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people". What I want to emphasise here is the nature of Jesus' invitation. He doesn't say, "give up completely what

it is that you're doing in life to become my follower". He doesn't say that your life as it is stinks. He doesn't condemn Simon's and Andrew's and James' and John's family commitments, or their livelihood—in fact, quite the opposite. Instead, what he's actually saying is: "do you think that *this* is fishing? Come and see what fishing can *really* be like". This is a good-natured goad, directed at the imaginations of young men and calling them deeper into their lives. Christian vocation builds on our earlier life, it doesn't dismiss it.

So Christ's call to us isn't a negative call requiring the denial of life. Rather, it's a positive call to let go of the sin that sucks the oxygen out of life, and to find the freedom that transforms our life. It's a call that adds joy to responsibility, and surprise to obedience. It's a call that delivers the added bonus of poise and trustworthiness when it demands discipline, and fulfilment when it demands renunciation. Jesus' call to follow him is a call to be freed, fulfilled, and fascinated as the people we are, not to become pretenders at a sentimental holiness not worth having. Jesus teases those young

fishermen with the prospect of something more—“Follow me and I will make you fish for people”—and so he teases us in the Eucharist today. “Follow me and I will make you a better husband, a better Mother, a better boss, a better work colleague, a better priest, a better writer, a better friend, a better Australian”.

The call of Jesus is a demand, yes, and it changes lives, yes, but it’s a demand to be more, not less: to be more engaged in life, not less; to be more transformed in life, not stuck in a rut. As with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, hanged by the Nazis, and as with Christians who fall into the hands of Islamic State thugs today, it *can* mean a call to die. But it’s chiefly a call to live: to live free, confident and worthwhile lives, marching to the sound of a different drummer.

Now to close let me just clarify that this is also the point of our epistle today. St Paul writes to the Corinthian Christians about the new converted life of the disciple. Note that he doesn’t tell them to give up their marriages, their homes, their emotional attachments, or their worldly commercial activity. No, we keep at it in all these

areas, but we do so now in a new Christian spirit. Yet Paul does advise that a new perspective, and a degree of detachment, is appropriate for Christians, who can never throw themselves into the agenda of this world without remainder. Today's regularly doomed search for happiness, or for financial security, perhaps to holding obsessively onto our lost loved ones, or simply our unthinking self-immersion in the push and pull of the everyday, can never be quite right for Christians. Instead we give attention to scripture and to prayer day by day, to taking our place in the Eucharistic community, to teaching our children to know Jesus and trust him and pray to him, rather than being content with our society's preferred religion, which is to look good, feel good and make good. Here I identify St Paul's challenge to contemporary Australian Christians like us. And standing behind Paul in his teaching today is Jesus' own wry smile, and his provocative teasing call to those youths on a fishing boat: come with me, and take a walk on the wild side.

The Lord be with you...