

And the bait is ... ?

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
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Isaiah 6:1-8; Ps 138; 1 Corinthians 15:11-11; Luke 5:1-11

Today all our scripture stories are about call and vocation – All of the characters are in one way or another called to proclaim the message of God, to be part of God's purpose and mission in the world. The message Isaiah had to proclaim was not particularly pleasant for his listeners. It was about God's struggle with his people, their unfaithfulness and breaking of their promises and God's seeming frustration and anger but it was also a message of hope and redemption. Paul's message was the good news of Christ's saving death and resurrection. Simon Peter's message was – well Simon Peter the fisherman was called to catch people.

God calls each and every one of us to a particular task, to a vocation. What that is will be as diverse as we are diverse, although there will be common threads. One of the major threads for followers of Christ is that we are individually and collectively called to proclaim Christ to the world and be part of that process of others being found by God and finding God. We like Simon Peter are called to fish for people.

Perhaps this idea makes you nervous—it does me—also makes me tired. Nervous because I am wary of people who run around trying to convert me to something and tired because in the church at the moment and in our diocese particularly there is a lot of talk about evangelism and growing the church. At the one-day clergy conference on Thursday many of the presentations were about this critical issue. It was interesting but one of my feelings was weariness – all those programs and possibilities, all those new fresh expressions of church to explore. And if you are anything like me you ignore the word part of the saying—preach the Lord in Word and Deed. It does not say and/or. It is actually both.

The Gospel imperative is there. The story we have been given is a message for everyone and it is liberating, saving, empowering and life-giving. Whatever we think about evangelism, whatever our feelings, whatever our sense of unworthiness or confusion, the Christ story is extraordinary. The story of God's amazing grace and love, Christ's life-giving sacrifice to save us from darkness and death, the Holy Spirit's powerful gifts is treasure of the most fine and abundant and we have been changed by finding this treasure. Yet we tend to want to wrap it up in a gilded box with a large key, keep it safe and look at it occasionally. A great line I heard recently was that we are not called to be keepers of an aquarium. We are called to be fishers of people.

Well how do we do that? Well firstly it is not just my job. I know the church gives me a very nice stipend to stand here and proclaim the gospel—and perhaps this is the moment to say “thank you very much” because I love doing it but this task is the task of all of us. Hans Kung, the catholic theologian whose autobiography I am currently engrossed in, always seemed to be on the wrong side of his clerical superiors. One reason was he asserted the priesthood of all believers; a concept well grounded in the New Testament letters. Like the Hebrew priests of old, each one of us has the story, is to tell the story and be Holy people. So the task of proclaiming Christ is not just for those ordained. It is not just for so-called evangelists either, although those with that particular charism can teach us much. No the task belongs to us all.

So when you are fishing, what is it that you need? I have done a little bit of fishing. In fact one of the best days of my life was when I went rock fishing by myself on the south coast. That day I took a fishing rod, reel and a net and some bait. I spent the day exploring inlets

and nooks and crannies, looking for where the fish actually were. I also took along a lot of patience. I am no fisherwoman and I spent a lot of time stripping off and diving into the ocean looking for an expensive float I kept snagging. But I did catch fish.

Now fishing for people in the gospel sense is not like that. Although some people do, I do not recommend heading off to the mall (where the fish are) with a bible in your hand (the bait) and hanging about for the afternoon. Or what I heard someone doing recently – they lurked where joggers were, interrupted their run and told them that Jesus loved them passionately. No, the thing we most need and the thing we most need to do is to be our true, authentic selves. We don't mend, tend or haul the net; rather, by God's grace we become the net. The apostles, those first preachers of Jesus message, were first and foremost transformed by Christ and became bearers of his life and message. In the process of following Jesus they became what they were called to be –they became the net—but they started exactly where they were.

How often have we thought, "I am not enough. I cannot do this, I do not have what it takes, I am not intelligent, gifted, enlightened or holy enough?" I continual theme of those called to ordained ministry is disbelief – me, they say, in horrified tones. Why would God want me? Deep down I suspect we are all like that and for a myriad of reasons. Perhaps because we were told often enough that we were useless or no good.

Perhaps we were simply ignored or not really seen so that we came to believe we were of no account. Perhaps we tried to accomplish something, failed and then decided we were simply good for nothing. Oh the tyranny of that self-doubt and condemnation! The three men in our scripture stories also felt deeply unworthy. Isaiah said, "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" Paul says he is "unfit to be called an apostle." And Peter begs Jesus "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man."

The thing that strikes me about these stories of call is that after these men fall to the ground so to speak, and beat themselves up, God holds out the hand of grace and love and says, none of that matters, you are enough, you are all I need. Jesus says those beautiful words, words he often says – 'do not be afraid'. No matter who or what we are, God can see the potential and the possibility. God can see deeply into who we are and he does not dwell on evil, sinfulness and darkness. God sees the light within and he calls forth that light. And he says, be that light and tell others about the true light of the world, Jesus Christ.

There are many ways and means to do this. Last night I went to the induction of John Barnes who is going to be the part-time rector of Gunning and the diocesan mission facilitator. John is a great block and I am hoping he will come and do some work with us towards the end to the year or early next year. However, the simplest, easiest, most authentic way to do preach the gospel in word and deed is to be yourself and to be prepared to tell others what God has done for you. You are your story and you tell your story. One of my colleagues recently began to experience doing this. She made the decision to tell the truth about who and what she believed. You might think that is a no brainer for a grown up, independent person. But if you think about it we all can cover up the truth about ourselves – the truth about our beliefs, our feelings, our doubts, our conflicts. Well she decided to tell her truth. Shortly after she was at the shops and she ran into a neighbour. The neighbour said, "How are you?" She said, "I am feeling fantastic". The neighbour then said, "Oh, Why?" And she replied, "Well, I've fallen in love with Christ again and it feels wonderful". The neighbour got a quizzical look on his face, smiled and said, "How wonderful" and they parted.

Now this is not about ‘converting’ the other. It is not about convincing them of something. It is about being who we are. We tell our story. We do not tell the other person what we think is their story – unless we are invited to do so.

I am rediscovering C.S. Lewis at the moment, one of the great 20th century Christian writers. Lewis always spoke from his own experience. He prefaced many of his sayings with, ‘this is the way I see it’. At times he would blatantly state he would never presume to tell anyone else what to believe. If we are authentically who we are then the Holy Spirit will use what comes from that and work with the other human beings around us. We become part of the Spirit’s work in the world in a very organic, moment-by-moment way. Who knows what will come from the encounter my friend had with her neighbour. I know they are still speaking and my friends’ world has not collapsed but when we are our true selves we plant seeds for God.

You know the story of our life and our relationship with God is as precious as any gospel. We are the last book of the bible. We have a story to tell that could make all the difference in the journey of someone else. We are called to proclaim the message of Jesus Christ not because God wants scalps, or because the church needs to grow if it is to pay its bills (a very poor reason for evangelism by the way) or because we think that is what proper Christians do. We are called to this task for the sake of others, for their wellbeing, for the sake of the Kingdom, for the sake of the world. We are one, tiny, little part of God’s plan for the world but a very important part.

In the Corinthians reading Paul has that great line, *“I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain”*. We are what we are and that is enough, for God’s grace and power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. Trust in that power and grace and tell your story. Amen.