

'Yes - we still can!'

Sermon preached by Rev Tony Windross on 22 January 2017 The Third Sunday of Epiphany based on Matthew 4: 12-23

Given all that's been happening in America over the last few months (and especially the last few *days*) – the referendum begins to seem a very long time ago.

But one of highlights of the campaign (for me anyway) remains as fresh as ever – and that was Mr Gove's pronouncement that *'Britain has had enough of experts'*.

It was an expression of true democratic inclusivity – and helped to empower ordinary people. No longer *need* they (or indeed *should* they) feel in awe to those who'd made it their life's work to study some particular subject, or acquire specialized skills.

Doctors, judges, engineers, airline pilots – what do they know? Anyone's capable of doing anything.

But in amongst the merriment that the remark engendered – there's also a certain amount of fear.

Because populism is only ever a hair's breadth from mob rule – which gratefully feeds on the post-truth idea that everyone's opinion is equally valid.

And that careful and detailed study and reflection about effectively anything is unnecessary – and maybe even undesirable.

Over the next few years we'll be able to see how all this works out – both here and in America.

But whatever reservations we may have – there's no denying that it struck a chord.

Because it meant (in effect) – that wisdom was available on the cheap.

Instead of requiring real (and sustained) effort – truth could be had off-the-shelf.

It's something the Church has had to contend with for a long time – with theologians (and maybe biblical scholars in particular?) often being seen as enemies of faith – as their job is to ask all sorts of uncomfortable questions about all sorts of things.

But there's nothing new in this – in that 1500 years ago Pope Gregory the Great famously said *'The Bible is a stream wherein the elephant may swim, and the lamb may wade'*.

Words that amount to an *insistence* that the bible has such depths and layers of meaning – that almost any part of it can be understood in a variety of ways and at all sorts of different levels.

Capable of providing support and comfort for lambs – as well as stimulation and challenge for elephants.

It means if we take the bible seriously – we've also got to take seriously what people who know much more about it than we do – have to say about it.

As Christians, the way we understand the bible – underpins and informs all of what we do.

And so the *way* we understand it – has *got* to stand up to scrutiny – otherwise we're building everything on sand.

We heard a moment ago the writer of Matthew's gospel telling of how Jesus said to Simon Peter and Andrew 'Follow me'.

And the result was – '*immediately* they left their nets and followed him'.

Apparently the same happened with James and John.

But *did* it?

Could it?

Were things *just like that*?

Was there *no* persuasive oratory from Jesus to try and convince them?

Did they *really* just go off with a complete stranger – and simply abandon their boats and families?

Leave everyone and everything they'd known – all their lives?

If so – *where* did they go?

Did they keep returning home – or was it gone for good?

What did their families feel about all this?

And did their families ever see them again?

Questions all elephants need to ask – because that's what elephants do.

(and it's by means of questions that we can tell the difference between an elephant and a lamb).

The story takes place on the edge of the sea – which in the gospels is always far more than a simple geographical description.

As well as being a place on a map – it's a place deep within each of us.

In the bible – water stands for both life and death.

And so the seashore is where each of us is all the time – on the frontier between the two.

And it's here that Jesus calls Simon Peter and Andrew.
At the point where their lives could go one way – or the other.

There's a parallel with the story of Elijah in the First Book of Kings (1 Kings 19:19) 1000 years earlier – who calls Elisha to be his disciple.

Elisha is ploughing the fields when (out of the blue) Elijah comes past and puts his prophet's cloak on Elisha's shoulders.

Elisha (apparently immediately!) – slaughters his cattle, roasts them on a fire made from the wood of his plough, kisses his father and mother goodbye – and follows his master.

Did he?

Just like that?

Who knows! – but whatever happened on the seashore – it was enough to get Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John to go off in a new and completely unexpected direction – leaving security and familiarity behind.

Maybe it was because they took seriously the words '*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*'?

We've no idea – but they're something we need to take seriously.

And we need to start by looking at the word '*repentance*' itself.

It's often thought to mean something like 'being sorry' – expressing remorse or regret for stuff we've done.

And it usually also involves the idea of apologising (with people often insistent (wrongly, in my opinion) – that forgiveness isn't possible without repentance).

Part of the BCP form of confession involves saying – ‘*we do earnestly repent, and are heartily sorry for these our misdoings; the remembrance of them is grievous unto us; the burden of them is intolerable*’.

So there’s plenty of ‘sorry’ stuff around with regard to ‘repentance’.

But there’s another meaning in the bible that has got nothing to do with bad behaviour at all – and is simply about ‘*changing our mind*’.

About coming to see things differently.

Which means the call to repentance – *doesn’t* have to be seen as an occasion to beat ourselves up for being miserable sinners.

But as an invitation to consider a different perspective.

To look at things in a new way.

To think outside the box.

And despite all the talk about living in a post-truth era – it’s *not* a case that any old perspective will do.

Some ways of looking at the world (and the people in it) *are acceptable* – in Christian terms.

And some clearly *are not*.

So the invitation to look at things in a new way – isn’t content-free.

If it’s to be a *Christian* way – it’s got to put the dignity and value of other human beings right at the top.

And that includes all the groups of people we might otherwise wish to ignore.

This is where the distinctive cutting-edge of Christianity – needs to be seen.

This is where all that counter-intuitive stuff about loving others unconditionally, and forgiving them unreservedly – needs to make an appearance.

Whether it actually does or not – will depend on whether we’ve heard (*and responded*) to the invitation that Simon Peter and Andrew had.

So – have we ever had a call to repentance (to a new, more generous way of seeing things)?

If so – what did we do about it?

And if not – are we open to getting one?

The passage from Matthew makes it as clear as it could be – that answering the call involves nothing less than total commitment.

The disciples were said to have left profession, possessions and family behind.

And even allowing for all sorts of artistic licence – the point is still well made.

Which is – that it's not possible (in fact it's not even *remotely possible*) to be a real disciple of Jesus – *and for our lives to go on in the same way as everyone else.*

So – *how are we different?*

In what ways do our lives express a warmth and an openness and a sense of connectedness to those on the margins?

In what ways are we working for the greater good – rather than simply looking after our own interests?

If you've ever had the pleasure of the company of children on a long car journey – you'll be familiar with the plaintive sound of '*are we nearly there?*' – uttered sometimes almost before the journey has begun.

But it's a question we need to keep asking – with relation to the Kingdom.

Are we nearly there?

Is it nearly here?

How could we tell?

What would be its signs?

The story of the call of Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John is an opportunity (and an incentive) for us – to review our discipleship.

And to ask whether our faith really *is* helping us live more satisfying, more generous, more joyful – and more love-filled lives.

Because *if it isn't* – what possible recommendation could we be to those outside?

And *if it isn't* – when are we going to repent?

When are we going to look at things differently?

Repentance is at the heart of the whole thing.

Because if we're serious about trying to reach out to those with little time for religion – we've also got to take seriously those things that *keep* them outside.

And whilst many of them can make no sense of the idea of apologising to a supreme being 'out there' somewhere – they may be *completely* open to the challenge of thinking again about how their lives are going.

About expressing regret for some of the choices they're made.

And maybe consider some significant changes in direction in the future.

Jesus showed us a way of life that we should follow – and the call to repentance is an open (and ongoing) invitation to revisit our prejudices and assumptions.

And (especially) – to dare to challenge the kinds of social narrative that demean and impoverish.

When Jesus said 'follow me' – he obviously wasn't talking to us – but to a handful of people around him, long, long ago, in very different circumstances.

But if we find his teaching and his example to be compelling (and if we don't it's difficult to see why any of us are here this morning!) – the challenge is how we ought to respond to the invitation that we have (in effect) overheard.

What *does* 'following Jesus' (in our own individual situations) – actually *amount* to?

What does it mean *to us*?

And what does it mean *for us*?

Taking it seriously involves each of us asking ourselves (on a regular basis, starting now) all sorts of questions – such as:

(i) What can I do to make this faith community – a more powerful expression of radically generous welcome, love and hope?

(ii) How can I become – a better advertisement of the gospel to the people I meet?

(iii) What can I do to help this become the kind of place – where both lambs and elephants feel fully at home?

(iv) And how can I do my bit to encourage some of the lambs (at least some of the time) – to take their feet off the bottom?

'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand'

It's a rallying cry for a new way of seeing the world.

It's urging us to open our eyes – and find value in those the rest of society dismisses as unimportant or expendable.

It's a reminder that if enough people have a vision of a world where the values of tolerance and generosity and equality and dignity are taken with absolute seriousness – the Kingdom may be within our grasp.

Just over 8 years ago, when Barack Obama won the presidential election – he made what came to be known as the '*Yes, we can*' speech.

It was of a new kind of future – and a lot of people were filled with enormous optimism.

Yes – we *still* can.

It's just got a bit harder.