

Commitment Sunday

Sunday 13 September 2009

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Readings:

Acts 2: 42-47

Mark 1: 9-20

Sermon

Welcome back to the rows of chairs this morning! Some of you are mighty relieved, and some of you are wishing you had some colouring.....! During our Summer cafe services some of the sermons were interactive – so continuing in that theme, but without the children to fall back on – a question for you:

Who were the people who we heard about in **both** of this morning's readings?

Those two readings are like snapshots in the lives of Jesus' first followers. David read about the beginnings of the Christian Church, just after the day of Pentecost when Peter had preached a sermon which had **3,000** – people deciding they wanted to follow Jesus. The reading tells us about their priorities as Church, and we'll come back to those later.

The 2nd reading was Mark's account of Jesus, calling Simon, who later became known as Peter (the one who preached that super sermon), and Andrew, James and John to follow him.

If we have any church background, or a bit of a memory of Sunday school, or of primary school RE, we'll probably have our own mental image of that reading, something of a blue eyed, golden haired Jesus in his Persil white robe and halo, looking meaningfully at the fishermen as they looked optimistically into their nets, on a sandy beach in the sunshine.

I think it might be a bit of a problem for us that the disciples were fishermen. Are there any keen fishermen here this morning? (... they are probably all at the Lake behind TN2 or on the banks of the Medway just now.) One of my colleagues is a keen fisherman, but for him fishing is when he gets away from real life.....and sat in a boat in the middle of a lake he rejoices that no-one will ask him budget questions, or send him an email, or require his intervention in a difficult issue.

And that's how we tend to think of fishing.....a leisure pursuit, chance for a quiet day out in the open air, with the possibility of a catch to impress your mates at the pub.

But the fishermen in Mark 1 weren't fishing for leisure. This was how they made their living. Theirs were family businesses, and selling the catch was how the family were fed, and housed and clothed. So when Jesus said "Come, follow me" he wasn't talking about them doing something different in their spare time, he was talking about their whole lives taking a new direction.

And when Jesus says to us "Come follow me" he's not just talking about what we do in *our* spare time either.

But of course, life was different in Bible times. Everyone in Galilee was religious and life was much slower, more carefree, and the sun shone most of the time - True or

false?

Well - the sun shone a lot, and it was an area of fertile farming land. The fishing industry was a prosperous one - the Sea of Galilee (13 miles long and 8 miles wide - so just a mile longer than Lake Windermere) was and still is a great source of fish.

But it wasn't the perfect God fearing community, where if a prophet said "Follow me" a listener would automatically and obediently do just that.

The Galilee region of the Roman Empire represented the edge of Jewish life, and was the sort of cultural frontier between the traditional Jewish life and the ungodly influences of the Greeks and the occupying Roman forces.

That's not to say that the Greeks and Romans weren't religious, in Rome the Emperor expected everyone to worship him - he thought he was a god. The Greeks on the other hand had loads of gods - you'll have heard of some of them - Apollo and Zeus and Aphrodite and Gaia and Eros and Pan - and there were many more! Enough to say that their beliefs and styles of worship were very different to the Jews who worshipped the one God in the ways in which he had instructed them - at least in their better moments!

All this meant that the Jews who lived in Galilee were scorned by their neighbours in Judea who used the name "Galilean" as an insult, meaning fool, heathen, sinner.... and they were certain that no prophets would ever come out of Galilee.

And we know they were wrong about that, but their certainty meant that the last thing these fishermen expected as they went about their daily grind was for a preacher to call them to follow him - and for them to do just that!

Mark's account doesn't give us any clues about what the fishermen knew about Jesus when he first called them. John's gospel gives us quite a different perspective on the same incident - a bit like reading about the same news in a daily paper and in the Courier.

In John's report one fisherman says to another "look - the lamb of God!" and they call Jesus "Rabbi" which means something a bit like teacher, but not the sort of teacher who stands in front of a class and writes fractions or verbs on the board, more the sort of teacher who gives one to one or small group tuition in a practical subject. And the subject Jesus offered these guys was "becoming fishers of men."

And it wasn't a bible study course once a week on the seashore, or a special day together at the weekend, it was an opportunity to follow Jesus seven days a week and to observe his every move, and to try to be like him.

They saw Jesus when the crowds thronged round him and he was the local celebrity, they saw him when the Pharisees tried to catch him out with trick questions, and then plotted against him.

They saw him when he was exhausted and wanted time out, they saw him relaxing with his friends - and his friends weren't a bunch of local holy men - they were described as sinners and tax collectors - precisely the people the local holy men wouldn't have been seen anywhere near.

What would Peter have thought if someone had told him, there by the fishing boats,

that today he would decide to follow this Jesus, and three years later he would be preaching to a crowd of thousands and his sermon would convince 3000 of them to follow Jesus as well!

Following Jesus, for all of us, is a process – after all you can't follow anyone if you are standing still. We're gathered here this morning to renew our Baptismal Vows as a mark of our commitment to following Jesus within the Body of Christ at St Philip's. As we gather, we are all of us at different stages of following Jesus. I don't think any of us here this morning can claim like Peter to have seen 3000 people come to Jesus as a result of something we have said, and some of us probably feel more like the fishermen, Jesus has said "come and follow me" - and we're intrigued by this Jesus but we don't really know much about him.

The Christian life is sometimes described as a journey. Last time we were at St Philip's Court, Mary was recalling a hymn she had known from many years ago, which had a line in it (which I will probably misquote now) that said something like "And every night I pitch my tent a little closer to home". If home is our eternal destiny with Jesus that is a good way to think of life. None of us knows how long our journey will be, but each day takes us that bit closer to our destination - Jesus.

On holiday last month we did quite a lot of walking. Not huge long hikes, but rather more than our normal week by week lifestyle includes. Here's the archetypal Dorset image (Durdle Door) that I guess you have all seen, even if you couldn't put a name to it?

We wanted to see Durdle Door ourselves, and take the pictures to prove it, and after a fruitless search for free parking, we grudgingly parked at Lulworth Cove, and decided to walk from there. The path was wide and well maintained for the hordes of tourists who do the walk, but it was steep and there was a lot of it that was steps.

Gareth and Brian found that tough on the knees, and though I don't have their knee troubles, it was hard work, not least because it was a very windy day so we were walking into the wind. Up and up we went, and in the other direction there were folk who had been, taken their photos, and were on the way back to the car park.

Gareth strode ahead and we climbed, more steps, up and up into the wind. At the top the view was glorious. It wasn't a very warm day but the sky was clear blue and the sea reflected it wonderfully, and in the distance we could see a huge rock formation, sticking out into the sea, with something of a gap at the bottom, through which we could just about see more water.

And as we paused for breath, and a drink of water, Brian said "Is that it then? Do we want walk all the rest of the way or should we turn back now?" I thought "Is that it?" and I said "I don't know....it doesn't look very impressive, it's not like that in all the photos....but maybe the tide's in or something"

And we looked at where other people were continuing the walk, and they were going down a slope – shallow, but long, so nice to walk down but less good to return....and as we looked further we could see....more steps, and another uphill path. We had already done quite a long walk that morning, so we weren't being lazy, and we had those knees to consider.. (as well as the fact that we were too tight-fisted to pay for more than 2 hours parking!)

But it wasn't very satisfying, because it wasn't what we had hoped for.... so we had to

choose, whether to stop there or to continue. We decided that we would carry on, up and down, steps and more steps, with the wind continuing to blow at us... and we had probably walked as far again when suddenly we had a view that had been hidden from us until then - Durdle Door in its unmistakable "take my photo" attraction - and an information board which told us that the little hole we saw from the top was called "Bat's Hole". (It was a geological feature but not in the same league for sightseers & Photo takers.)

For followers of Jesus there is always a temptation, however far we have done on our journey, so make do with second best.

Maybe we decided to follow him and did the Start Course or got confirmed or whatever, then life got tough - too many uphill steps with a strong wind to battle against, and we begin to wonder if it was worth it.

Or maybe we've been following for a long time, and we are tired, we've seen God at work, but we've also grappled with prayers that weren't answered in the way we had hoped, and we've started to drag our feet. We still know that Jesus is there, but we need to do up our walking boots, swig some cold water, remind ourselves of the promises we have made, and make a concerted new start to the next bit of the journey.

Jesus said "I have come that you might have life - life in all its fullness" but if we try to follow Jesus with a half hearted, part-time, when-there's-nothing-else-to-do, sort of commitment, we become dissatisfied, and we don't experience life with Jesus in all its fullness, and instead of following him as disciples we become bystanders, hangers on, happy to tick "C of E" on a form, but there our allegiance ends.

We're here this morning to affirm our Commitment to that next bit of the journey together, commitment to keeping the promises made at our baptisms, and if like me you were too young at your baptism to be able to remember other people making those promises, you might have made these promises for yourself at confirmation - and if you haven't and would like to - see Brian afterwards.

Brian's letter that most of you will have read talks about September having a "new year" feel to it. It's a new start, and how we react to new starts depends on all sorts of things, like our previous experience, and how we are feeling at the present.

School started this week, and last Sunday little Tommy Barlow said to me "I'm starting big school tomorrow" - and as a first timer he was very excited! I always think it's mean to pupils and teacher that from before the summer term ends, the shops are pushing "back to school merchandise" from uniforms to pencil cases and lunchboxes... but I suppose for the children who are starting school that adds to the excitement.

But there might be some folk here this morning who feel like new students who haven't got any of the right kit, and that if schoolchildren need new pencils and protractors for the new term, Christians re-committing themselves need the right kit, of knowing some Bible, and having a daily prayer life and having godly attitudes to the people who irritate them.

Jesus called those fishermen as they were. He didn't ask if they knew their Scriptures or if they were regular worshippers at the synagogue before he called them. He knew everything about them - about Peter's spectacular ability to open his mouth to change

feet, and about James and John, the two brothers who hadn't lost that childhood "he's my brother but I want to punch him" tendency.... And God calls us as we are. He doesn't expect us to get our lives sorted out and then he will accept us as followers, and then when the probation period is up he might just give us something to do for him.

Earlier we sang the same prayer we always sing at Communion - "Almighty God to whom all hearts are open, all desires known and from whom no secrets are hidden..." God knows everything about us...and he loves us.

But these fishermen weren't the same three years later on the day of Pentecost. Three years with Jesus, with 7 days a week on the job training for being fishers of men had transformed them. They were in the process of becoming more like Jesus, and that's a lifelong process for us all.

It's not an individual process. We can't become disciples by doing an online distance learning course. That's not to say we can't learn useful stuff that way, but being disciples is more than learning useful stuff, even useful stuff like what the Bible is about. It is about following Jesus and becoming more like him, and serving him, and we do those things best together.

We are baptised into a Mission Team, and Teams can't function alone.

A footballer can practice certain skills alone, but he can really only practice playing football when he practices with the rest of the team. You might be the only Christian in our household or workplace, and you might be aware of having to practice certain skills alone there – perhaps being patient or being loving – but that is exactly why you need to be part of the team here too.

The first Christians, in Acts 2, devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, and to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Most of them came to faith in Jesus from a Jewish upbringing so they were used to meeting others to worship on a regular basis. For many people who join the church it's a whole new way of life that takes some getting used to – it's not part of the way most people in Tunbridge Wells in 2009 live.

But it still matters, which is why we will re-commit ourselves to it this morning just have a look at the affirmation of commitment we have on the service sheet. We'll commit to continuing in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayer. Sarah and Jackie and Lu have updated the St Philip's Prayer diary this week. It's a useful way to pray for everyone in the church – it will be out of date again by next week, but it's much more up to date than the old copies!

We will commit to repenting and coming back to the Lord when we mess up. Like the fishermen we are being made more like Jesus but we won't always get it right. If we had time to read all the Bible between today's readings we would see that the fishermen don't either, but the good news is that God is more ready to forgive us than we are to ask for his forgiveness.

We will commit to proclaiming by word and example the good news of God in Christ. Tomorrow morning at this time we will be in all sorts of places – the office, the classroom, the clinic, the supermarket, the bus stop, the kitchen sink.....and Jesus calls us to follow him there too. That doesn't mean that Rob or Karen working in hospitals preach at their patients, or that any of the folk in St Philip's who work in retail spend all day on the shop floor singing hymns... but it means that when we

interact with other people we have the opportunity to love them with the love that Jesus has for them, and for us. And yes it might mean mentioning God, but first and foremost it might mean being the colleague who doesn't spend all day moaning, the teacher who encourages all the pupils, the parent who goes on loving the difficult child.

We will commit ourselves to serve Christ in all people, loving our neighbour as ourselves. I was reading this week about a Christian football coach. He wasn't a professional; he worked with a bunch of mouthy teenage lads who didn't always respect him. One of those lads is now the National Director of Youth for Christ. His parents were well known full time Christian workers, but he says it was the ongoing commitment of this football coach who never preached at him, but modelled Jesus to him, which was key in his committing himself to follow Jesus.

Finally this morning we will commit ourselves to acknowledging Christ's authority over human society, by prayer for the world and its leaders, by defending the weak, and by seeking peace and justice. Ours is not a private faith, however much the aggressive atheists of our day would like it to be. Whenever we pray the Lord's Prayer we pray for God's kingdom to come, and if we are living for Jesus we must work with him to bring in his kingdom values. Justice and peace are not just for Tearfund Sunday – they are part of our seven days a week discipleship.

Some of us were here last Sunday afternoon and heard Jean Kerr talking about growing churches, and she said that churches won't grow unless congregations get on with serving those in need, with standing up for justice, and for grabbing hold of their vocation.

Vocation is a word we tend to use very selectively, so Doctors and Nurses and Vicars have a vocation, and so do Readers and PAs and Evangelists. But a vocation is a calling, and Jesus has called each of us, though what he wants us to do will be different for each one of us. His calling is on our lives... at work and at home, on our relationships with other Christians and with those who don't know Jesus, his calling is on the 21st century aspects of our lives. Lots of us here are on Facebook now. Does who we are, and what we say and do on Facebook glorify Jesus?

In a minute I am going to stop (!) and we're going to hand out the booklets Brian mentioned. They aren't for reading now – they are for taking home and reading, but while they are given out the music group are going to sing a modern version of an old Charles Wesley hymn which we will sing again together at the end of the service. This version has the old words about "Forth in your name O Lord I go my daily labour to pursue" with an additional "Be glorified in me".

Whatever we are doing this week, whoever we are with, wherever we are, will we be willing to let Jesus be glorified in us? However willing we might feel this morning, that's not something we can do on our own. We've already thought about the fact that we need each other, but even together we can't do it in the strength of our own willpower. We can't whip up a passion for serving Jesus by sheer effort, we come to God in our weakness and frailty, and we ask him to help us.

We need to be willing to ask God for his help, which is why each of those questions is answered in the same way - "With the help of God, I will" we don't know what lies ahead, but the Lord who says "Follow me" does, and if we stay close to him he will help us.