

Polbeth Harwood linked with West Kirk of Calder (Mark 1:14-20)

'In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit'

Ok, be honest, what would you have done? You are on the shores of the Sea of Galilee mending your nets, trying to fish and this bloke wanders up and asks you to follow him? You don't really know him, you may perhaps have heard his name mentioned locally but you wouldn't really have known him.....Would you do it, would you have just got up and followed him leaving everything and everyone behind?

In Mark's gospel, Jesus appears abruptly by the sea of Galilee and, without warning, calls unsuspecting fishermen to be disciples. Jesus is not going to be a lone prophet wandering in the desert but a leader, whose task as Messiah is to create a community of followers.

Jesus chose ordinary folk as disciples; they did not come from schools or colleges or drawn from ecclesiastics or aristocracy, they were neither learned nor wealthy. In any case a rabbi in that cultural time and setting would not seek students, students would seek the rabbi who they thought was worth following!

Since Simon and Andrew cast nets from the shoreline, they were possibly too poor to own a boat while the Zebedees are more upscale with a boat that can take them anywhere on the lake and hired hands to help with the labour. Whatever their circumstances, these men show their desire to turn by dropping everything to heed Jesus' call. It's more than just a matter of an internal transformation; they turn into something that they are not; now from fishermen to fishers of men.

What is striking is that Jesus calls them to follow him – he says ‘follow me’. Prophets did not call people to follow themselves, but to follow God. The sages of Jesus’ day never called people to follow them, only to learn the Torah from them.

Jesus’ call of the disciples is therefore dramatically authoritative and matches the biblical pattern of God’s calling of people; a command with a promise, which is followed by obedience. The call so overpowers these disciples that their lives will never be the same again. One who calls with such astounding spiritual power also teaches with power. We can then conclude from this that becoming a disciple of Jesus is more of a gift than an achievement. Jesus models what he calls them to do as fishers of men. They have been caught in the nets of God’s grace, and it will transform their lives.

Simon and Andrew were casting a net into the sea for they were fishermen. Things they were doing now having had watched their father’s and grandfather’s probably, knowing this is how they would spend their time too. Day after day it was the same thing; the same sea, the same net. Day after day it was wind, water, fish, sore muscles, tired bodies, it was a physically tough job.

Cast the net, pull it in, mend the net. Cast the net, pull it in, mend the net. If you were not casting the net, then you were sitting in the boat mending the net. That’s what James and John were doing. Casting and mending. Casting and mending. Casting and mending.....

We may not fish for a living but we know about casting and mending nets. Days that can all seem the same. One looks like another, especially in lockdown. Life is routine, lived on autopilot. Nothing changes. We don't expect much to happen. This is our life. We cast nets. We mend the nets.

Casting and mending to make a living, to feed our family, to pay the bills. Casting and mending to gain security and get to retirement. Casting and mending to nurture our family and bring up our children. Casting and mending to gain the things we want; a house; a car; technology; clothes; a holiday. Casting and mending to earn a reputation, gain approval, establish status. Casting and mending our way through our loneliness, anxiety, sadness, or ill-health.

Casting and mending are realities of life. They are also the circumstances in which Jesus comes to us, the context in which we hear the call to new life, and the place where we are changed and the ordinary becomes the extraordinary.

These would-be disciples Simon and Andrew, James and John, were not looking for Jesus. They are too busy with the nets. It was another day of casting and mending. They may not have even have noticed Jesus but he not only sees them - he speaks to them. Jesus has a way of showing up in the ordinary places of life and interrupting the daily routines of casting and mending nets. That's what he did to the lives of Simon, Andrew, James and John. That's what he does to your life and my life.

'Follow me' is Jesus' invitation to a new life. If these four fishermen accept the invitation, their lives will forever be different. They will be different. They will no longer catch just fish. They will fish for people.

When Jesus says, 'I will make you fish for people,' he is describing the transformation of their lives, not simply a job catching members or followers. He could just as easily have said to the carpenters and builders, 'Follow me, and you will build the kingdom of heaven'. To the doctors and physicians, 'Follow me, and you will heal the brokenness of the world'. To the teachers, 'Follow me, and you will open minds and hearts to the presence of God'.

Whatever your life is, however you spend your time, there is in that life Jesus' call 'Follow me'. 'Follow me' is the call to participate with God in God's own saving work. It's the work of change and vision and growth, taking our life in a new direction, and experiencing that our individual story of life is connected to and is a part of a much larger story of life, God's life.

As Jesus walked by the Sea of Galilee he saw Simon, Andrew, James and John. Jesus called them. In his gospel Mark records no discussions, no questions, no good-byes. They simply left and followed him.

Now I don't know about you but I would have questions when Jesus says, 'Follow me' – So in my case, maybe also in your case, when Jesus says, 'Follow me', Mark would need to write these words after the 'follow me' statement; 'and immediately the questions followed'. 'Where are we going? What will we do? How long will we be gone? What do I need to take? Where will we stay? And I am sure there are other questions you would ask too!

But this conversation doesn't take place in Mark's gospel. Jesus does not offer a map or any kind of itinerary, or even destinations – Jesus offers only an invitation. This is not the type of journey you can prepare for. This is the inner journey, a journey into the deepest part of our being, the place where God resides. It's not about the planning and organising, making lists, or packing supplies. It's not that easy. If anything this journey is about leaving things behind. This is what Mark says: 'Immediately they left their nets and followed him'. 'They left their father Zebedee in the boat.....and followed him'.

The invitation, 'follow me', is also the invitation to leave behind; to leave behind our nets, our boats.

That's the hard part for most of us. We're pretty good at accumulating and clinging but not so good at letting go. More often than not our spiritual growth involves some kind of letting go. We never get anywhere new as long as we're unwilling to leave where we are. We accept Jesus's invitation to follow, not by packing up, but letting go.

'Follow me', is both the invitation to and the promise of new life. So what are the nets that entangle us? What do we need to let go of and leave behind that we might follow him?

However, please don't think this is simply about changing careers, disowning our family, or moving to a new town. This is about the freedom to be fully human and in so discover God's divinity within us. We let go so that our life may be re-orientated, so that we can travel in a new direction, so that we may be open to receive the life of God anew. When we let go, everything is transformed – including our nets, our boats, our family. That's why Jesus could tell them they would still be fisherman. But now they would fish for people. They wouldn't become something they weren't already, but they would be changed. They would become transformed fisherman. They would more authentically be who they already were.

Sometimes I wonder if perhaps we read this story too narrowly. I am not sure that following Jesus is always a matter of leaving everything behind. That is what it meant for Simon, Andrew, James and John; that is what following meant in their particular lives. But if the story is about being swept into the flow of God's will and giving ourselves over to it, then it seems to me that it will be a different story for every one of us in our own particular lives.

It's about letting go of our own life so that we can receive God's life. The letting go happens in the context of our everyday activities, work, school, family, paying the bills, running errands, food shopping, fixing dinner, relationships and trying to do the right thing. It happens in the casting and mending of our nets. These are the times and places Jesus shows up and calls into a new way of being and our world changes. The possibilities for following are endless. Sometimes they will be big and sometimes they will be small. The God who calls us can be counted on to create us as people who are able to follow. For this happened to Simon, Andrew, James and John and it can happen for you and for me.

Amen.