

## Readings for the Third Sunday after Epiphany

22<sup>nd</sup> January 2023

### First Reading: Isaiah 9:1-4

There will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light: those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined. You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.

### Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 1:10-18

I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, 'I belong to Paul,' or 'I belong to Apollos,' or 'I belong to Cephas,' or 'I belong to Christ.' Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name. I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.

For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power. For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

### Gospel: St Matthew 4:12-23

When Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: 'Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles – the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.' From that time Jesus began to proclaim, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'

As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the lake – for they were fishermen. And he said to them, 'Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.' Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

## A Reflection for the Third Sunday after Epiphany

At my ordination to the priesthood, one of the hymns I chose was *Lord, you have come to the lakeside*. Unfortunately, it doesn't seem to be particularly well-known, at least in congregations I have been part of. Originally written in Spanish, with the title *Pescador de hombres*, there are many different English translations. The version I know best is this one:

Lord, you have come to the lakeside  
looking neither for wealthy nor wise ones.  
You only ask me to follow humbly.

*O Lord, with your eyes you have searched me,  
kindly smiling, have spoken my name.  
Now my boat's left on the shoreline behind me;  
by your side I will seek other seas.*

You know so well my possessions;  
my boat carries no gold and no weapons;  
but nets and fishes, my daily labour.                      *O Lord, ...*

You need my hands, full of caring,  
through my labours to give others rest,  
and constant love that keeps on loving.                      *O Lord, ...*

You, who have fished other oceans  
ever longed for by souls who are waiting,  
my loving friend, as thus you call me.                      *O Lord, ...*

I chose this for my ordination because it speaks to me about following Jesus and how, in many ways, that should be quite a straightforward thing to do, yet we often don't find it so.

It is based on the story of the fishermen called to be Jesus's disciples, as we read in today's Gospel and the parallel passages in the Gospels of Mark and Luke. Matthew writes:

As he walked by the Sea of Galilee (*Lord you have come to the lakeside*), he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the lake – for they were fishermen. And he said to them, 'Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.'

The Spanish title of the hymn, *Pescador de hombres*, translates as 'Fisher of men', although that phrase doesn't appear in the hymn, at least not in the English translation.

Last week, I wrote of Jesus' baptism and how it marked the beginning of his public ministry. Today we hear of him starting that work of gathering and reconciling the people to God and he calls the fishermen, first Peter and Andrew, then James and John, to join him in that mission. Those called to follow him were to be more than just supporters; they were to work alongside him to show forth the light that had been prophesied, the kingdom heaven that is near.

The people that Jesus calls to join him in that work – those fishermen then and us today - were and are ordinary, humble people as the hymn says in the first verse: he was *looking neither for wealthy nor wise ones*. We don't need to be rich and we don't need to be clever to follow Jesus. And in the second verse: *my boat carries no gold and no weapons* – again, we don't need to be rich (the gold), or powerful (the weapons) to follow Jesus. Indeed, then as now, it is those most deeply invested in the imbalanced economic, political and power structures of the world who find it most difficult to receive the good news of the Gospel wholeheartedly. Jesus only asks us *to follow humbly*. I find it immensely reassuring that there is only one qualification needed, if you can call it that, to follow Jesus and that is to be willing to do so humbly.

The difficulty, of course, is in the word 'humbly'. Our pride gets in the way and we so often try to do things in our own strength. We know what to do in this or that situation, we don't need to refer our decisions to God – it's obvious!

Then there is the question of what following Jesus entails. Jesus called and calls his disciples as co-workers in his mission to gather and reconcile God's people to God. As the third verse of the hymn reminds us, Jesus needs our hands to be his on earth, to care for and love others. That can, and should, have implications for how we use the time and the resources entrusted to us in our earthly life. Our care for those we love naturally follows but is extended to embrace others – our neighbours of all sorts, even those we don't love!

Again, it can become difficult. We are tired and would rather have some time to ourselves; we really want to spend our money on something we want. Of course, there are times when we need to do those things, for we need to love ourselves if we are to love others, but it becomes a problem when selfishness starts to get in the way. And then there is the issue that we all know: it is hard to love people who are not loving towards us.

I find it more difficult to unpick the meaning of the fourth verse of the hymn; perhaps something is lost in translation. That Jesus has *'fished other oceans'* is perhaps a reference to his coming for all people, not just people like us, not just the Christians of the world, but all people. Who are the souls who are waiting? Perhaps those who know little or nothing of the Christian faith, including many in our own society in the present age. Perhaps those who feel a gap in their lives but don't recognise it as a longing for God. Our task is to show God to others in the way we live our lives, the way we make our decisions and the way we prioritise our commitment to God. The rest is the work of the Holy Spirit. As I have discovered again recently, you never know when something you do or say will help the penny to drop for someone else, sometimes quite a long time later.

One of the things that may strike us as surprising, and scary if we apply it to ourselves, is the apparent willingness of those fishermen to drop everything and follow Jesus when he said 'Follow me'. Did they give up fishing for ever? Possibly not - they were certainly able to pick it up again later, even briefly – John's Gospel tells us that, after Jesus' death and resurrection, Peter and some others go fishing.

Are we called to drop everything? The significance of answering the call to 'Follow me' is surely more about a change of priorities rather than abandoning everything we have known, at least for most people. It is a call to put our trust in God and be committed to God first and foremost.

The refrain of the hymn speaks of the total obedience of the disciples and entreats us to follow Jesus with the same obedience and commitment. Once that key decision has been made, other decisions should be made in the light of it.

Shall I follow Jesus? Yes

Shall I carry on as a fisherman? No, or not just now

Is financial security my main priority in life? No

A sticking point, that probably applies to all of us, is that the world makes many demands on us and society no longer sees religious belief and faith as particularly important. It is considered irresponsible to be seen as financially reckless by giving away what we might (or might not) need later, and it can be hard to balance that with a desire to be generous and not to hang onto money and possessions for the sake of it. It's also the case that many people, including some of our nearest and dearest, don't always understand the priority of our faith, so we can sometimes feel as if we are forced to choose between them.

I said earlier that I chose this hymn for my ordination because it speaks to me about how following Jesus should be quite straightforward: Jesus says 'Follow me'. If we answer 'Yes', then we are called to trust in him and to love others. Simple. Except that things get in the way, including our pride, our self-interest, and the demands of others.

Last week, I reflected that our baptisms are a step on our journey of faith, near the beginning but something brings us to that point. Somewhere, some time, Jesus says to us 'Follow me' and we say 'Yes'. Our journey has its ups and downs, as we all know; times in which we may do quite well in following Jesus, and others when we don't do so well. But Jesus always offers hope and forgiveness and continues to say: 'Follow me'.

*O Lord, with your eyes you have searched me,  
kindly smiling, have spoken my name.  
Now my boat's left on the shoreline behind me;  
by your side I will seek other seas.*