

Readings for the Third Sunday after Epiphany

25th January 2026

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

‘Jesus said to them: “Follow me...” Immediately they left their nets and followed him.’

Have you ever done something totally spontaneously? Was it good, or did you regret it? Was it life-changing? I’m not a very spontaneous person. I’ve racked my brains and can’t think of a time when I’ve done something significant completely spontaneously. I’ve certainly done things that my nearest and dearest would consider rash, but not without some degree of thought beforehand. And perhaps I’ve missed out because of that lack of spontaneity.

In today’s Gospel, we hear of the first disciples making a decision that was to be life-changing in the best possible way. ‘Jesus said to them: “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him.’ Was it spontaneous, or not so much? How well did they know Jesus and what was it about him that made them drop everything and follow him, responding to words that were more command than invitation?

We can say with a reasonable amount of certainty that Jesus and these fishermen were probably not lads that grew up together, although they were all from Galilee. As you know, Jesus was raised in Nazareth, which is in the hills, something a little over 20 miles as the crow flies from Capernaum on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Quite a distance in those days from the home towns of Andrew and Peter, who were from Bethsaida, a town near Capernaum, and of James and John who also appear to have been from the Capernaum area as their father was with them in their boat.

Nevertheless, they probably did have some knowledge of Jesus. Today’s passage tells us that Jesus had left Nazareth and made Capernaum his home, in doing so fulfilling another bit of Old Testament prophecy from Isaiah, for Nazareth is in the territory of Zebulun and Capernaum in the territory of Naphtali. So it is likely that the fishermen had come across Jesus, at least by reputation, simply by being in the same town where he was beginning his ministry of teaching and healing.

However, at least two of these men had definitely met Jesus before. The sharp-eyed among you will have spotted that Andrew was named in last week’s Gospel as a disciple of John the Baptist who had become a follower of Jesus, and had taken his brother Simon Peter with him. That encounter took place much further South, somewhere near Bethany where John was baptising, and last week’s passage told us that they spent a day with Jesus. After that encounter, Jesus returned to Galilee, and so too it seems Andrew and Peter.

Thus, for Andrew and Peter, the decision to follow Jesus here seems rather less spontaneous. For them, Jesus was known and, as Fr David pointed out to us last week, their decision to follow him could have been in imitation of their role model, John the Baptist. Someone whose opinion they valued had pointed Jesus out to them as one to follow.

We know less about James and John. Perhaps one of them was the other, unnamed disciple of John the Baptist we heard about last week. Or maybe they had heard about Jesus from their fishing friends Andrew and Peter. If Jesus was going about performing miracles of healing as the last paragraph suggests, perhaps they were star struck. Or was it the convincing arguments of his teaching? Or was it, more simply, Jesus’ gentle manner; his love, kindness and genuine acceptance of others; the perfect human welcoming others irrespective of their imperfections?

Whatever the reason, Matthew focusses on the most important point: they followed Jesus. So we see here Jesus begin his mission of gathering people and restoring them to wholeness, an act of resistance against all that is wrong in the world. These first disciples were to be the first witnesses of God’s kingdom, the kingdom of heaven as Matthew

terms it. They were the ones who would be tasked with carrying the light of that kingdom to all nations. And, in this passage, we see the basic practices of God's kingdom: calling people, healing people, and freeing them to continue God's work in the world.

Jesus' proclamation 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near' echoes John the Baptist who, in this Gospel, used exactly the same words. This emphasises the continuity of their ministries, but there is a subtle difference. When John the Baptist says 'the kingdom of heaven has come near', it is near but not here yet, it is coming soon and it is time to prepare. When Jesus says 'the kingdom of heaven has come near', it is near in the person of Jesus, so now; it is a call to action, to participation in bringing in that kingdom. This story is an account of an epiphany in this season of epiphanies, another revelation of Jesus' divinity through fulfilment of prophecy and in his ministry of healing and teaching that is inaugurated here.

Ever since that first encounter by the Sea of Galilee, Jesus has continued to call people to his mission. This Sunday, 25th January, is also the day when the church remembers the conversion of St Paul (although, being the church, because this date falls on a Sunday this year, it will be commemorated on Monday instead). As I am sure you remember, as Saul he was a great persecutor of the early Christians who encountered the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus. His was a dramatic conversion to following Jesus, in a vision and a blinding light. It was a conversion that led him to be one of the greatest missionaries of the early church, drawing people to Jesus through his preaching across the eastern Mediterranean area, and down the centuries through his written letters.

Jesus continues to call people today. Like those first disciples, the reasons for us answering his call to 'Follow me' are many and various. Some of us, as David mentioned last week, do so in imitation of those we know and love or admire. Some of us, like Paul, have experienced dramatic events or miracles in our lives that have turned us to Jesus. Others are convinced by the arguments of his teaching. Perhaps most of all, people are drawn to Jesus by his manner – his love and acceptance of all of us, despite our shortcomings. The somewhat sobering thought for the church is that Jesus' love and acceptance is generally perceived through the attitudes and actions of his followers, which is not always all that it might be.

The mission that Jesus began on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, to inaugurate the kingdom of heaven by gathering God's people, restoring them to wholeness, and resisting all that is wrong in the world, remains the mission of the church, our mission, today. Gathering, restoring and resistance are still basic practices of God's kingdom in a fragmented and damaged world. We are the witnesses of God's kingdom in this generation. Whatever has gone before is past. Now, as always, is the time to gather, to heal and to challenge, to join in and play our small part in bringing the light to all nations. We don't always get it right, but Jesus still calls us, loves, accepts and heals us.