

## Sermon – Called Together – January 22<sup>nd</sup> 2023

Today our gospel reading invites us to ponder the call of Christ – to his first disciples, Peter, Andrew, James and John, and, of course, to us. This is a pretty good thing for us to do at the start of a new year – to reflect with gratitude on the past, perhaps on our first sense of responding to Jesus' call, or on particular points in our lives when we have been aware of being led by God – and to think about what that call means to us, individually and collectively, today. We are going to take a few minutes to ponder those things after this sermon – time which I hope may be helpful to some.

This morning I would just like to say a few words about four connections between the three readings we have just heard.

First of all, and perhaps most obviously, there's a common reference to a **location**: We're told by Matthew that after Jesus heard that John the Baptist had been arrested, he moved from Nazareth to Capernaum. Matthew quotes a prophecy from Isaiah that we heard read: "Land of Zebulun, and land of Naphtali, on the road to the sea, on the other side of the Jordan, land of the Gentiles! The people who live in darkness will see a great light. On those who live in the dark land of death the light will shine."

This region had historically belonged to the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali, but had been lost to Assyrian invaders 700 years before, and in the first century it truly was "Galilee of the Gentiles," conquered by Rome and ruled (on Rome's behalf) by Herod. At our service on New Year's Day we learned quite a bit about Herod – who was notorious for his brutality and for his intolerance of any who threatened his claims to power. Jesus chose to enter into this context of darkness and death, proclaiming deliverance and light and life. There's hope for us today as we reflect on that fact.

Which brings us to the second obvious link between our readings: one of the most beautiful and hopeful Biblical images of God's presence in the world – **light shining in darkness**. I sometimes wonder what it must have been like in the age before electric light, or even gaslight, when darkness would have been so much deeper and so much harder to dispel than it is for us today. If we wake feeling troubled or distressed in the middle of the night, at the flick of a switch our fears will often recede. If we have difficulty finding our way in the dark, we can grab a torch or even speak to our phone, and immediately hazards are illuminated and we gain a clearer sense of direction. Despite these advances in technology, the metaphor of light shining in the darkness continues to resonate deeply within us, because we are all well aware of darkness in our world, and, at times, within ourselves.

Which brings us to a third theme that links our readings: the need to **repent** – to make a choice to turn towards God, not just once in our lives, but whenever we

sense that we are going off course – an experience that St Ignatius called “spiritual desolation”. As the reading from Paul’s letter to the Corinthians illustrates, it’s pretty easy for us to go off on foolish or destructive tangents, and to get things spectacularly wrong, even within the church. Sadly, we know this to be true in our own day and age – a point which I know I do not need to spell out or labour. Jesus’ message: “Turn away from your sins, because the Kingdom of heaven is near!” was not simply for those early disciples, or people who had not responded to the warnings of John the Baptist or other prophets, but for us, too. Throughout our lives, as we read the gospels, reflect on Jesus’ interactions with those he encountered, and come to know his care for us through prayer and life experience, we can experience the call to repentance as one of grace. “Turn away from your sins, because the Kingdom of heaven is near!” This is not a threat, but an offer of rescue. We need not go blundering around in the dark.

Finally, both our New Testament readings remind us that **the call to follow Jesus is a communal one**. Jesus called followers to *come with him* to share in spreading the good news, through word and deed. Yes, the disciples were called as individuals, by name. Peter and Andrew, James and John each made their own choice to leave their nets and respond to Jesus. But it is interesting that some were called in pairs, or invited others to come and join them as they joined Jesus. Last week I believe that Hamish spoke about John’s version of Jesus’ call to Andrew and Peter, then Philip, who approached Nathanael. There’s a strong sense of a team forming, right from the start.

Within the church and in the community there are many acts of service that can be carried out by individuals. I am aware of only *some* of the loving actions that are carried out by members of this congregation behind the scenes, but I know that many of you seek, in a range of ways, to bring light to people who are struggling. But by God’s grace we are *also* called to work *with others* in sharing the light of the gospel and Jesus’ message of forgiveness and grace. When we support one another and celebrate one others’ gifts – and are not divided by our differences (petty or large) – then congregations can be very ‘shiny’.

Over lunch on Thursday, Gail and Hamish and I were talking about children’s ministry within our parish – which is currently very capably led by an individual, Janice, *and* very generously supported by a team of faithful parishioners, *and*, by the wider congregation. Gail’s observation was that when a youth or children’s worker is not working in isolation the message to children and families is that they are valued by the whole congregation, not just by one person. We hope and pray, too, that the message conveyed to our children and families is that they are valued and loved by God. That is just one among many examples from within this particular parish that I could have chosen, of course. When we consider the work of the worldwide church ... we pray that the light of the presence of God is experienced in many places of darkness.

As we consider our call to follow Jesus Christ, as individuals and as people who are part of a much bigger community of faith, we might ask ourselves a few questions:

- What is God calling me to at this time? (Picture) Is the start of this year a good time to reflect on my values and choices?
- Is our church a place where people can discover their call? Are their ministries in which everyone can participate – meaningful ways for everyone to contribute and be part of the team?
- Do we have an outward focus – in what ways are we, as individuals and as a church, able to be light-bearers and light-bringers? How might we let the light of Christ shine through us?

