

Following Jesus

Nick Mountfort 22 January, 2017

Reading: Matthew 4:12-23

Loving God, Open the Bible in a new and exciting way. In Jesus name. Amen.

My experience of fishing is so different from that of our Gospel. I once spent a summer sea-fishing with a friend off the Moeraki Peninsula. I watched very carefully everything he did so that I could imitate him in his every action: how to start the boat, how to drive the boat, how to cast the net, how to bring in the net, how to gut the fish, how to untangle the net, how to read the wind, how to keep the boat heading into the waves and the list goes on. As it turned out it was a good thing I had watched so closely because, unbeknownst to us, he was a very bad diabetic. One night just on dusk out on a rough sea, he decided this would be a good time to pass into a coma. The two of us, an Australian and me, had to get him and all the nets back to shore. The Aussie had been constantly going on about what a great cricket team they had. So quickly I said, "You can give him the kiss of life. I'll drive the boat."

The big difference between our fishing and the first disciples is that we do it mostly for recreation; they did it for a living. We do it to relax. For them it was anything but relaxing because their families' livelihoods depended on the outcome. It was a simple equation: no fish, no money, no food. And many times they would have been just on the margin.

This makes the line that appears in today's Gospel all the more remarkable. Verse 20 - "immediately they left their nets and followed him" (referring to Simon and Andrew) and again in verse 22 "immediately they left their nets and followed him" (referring to James and John).

What sort of call would have us immediately drop our livelihoods and follow?

Alongside this sense of urgency and total commitment are the words "They followed him."

But what does it mean to follow Jesus?

For Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John, it wasn't enough just to watch Jesus from a distance. They wanted to live his life with him so that they could learn to live like him. And this is what they did for three years.

Matthew gives us (and those at the time) the perfect image for what this new life would be like. It would be like fishing for people. My experience of fishing is that there is just so much to learn. And the only way to do it is to imitate the master fishermen, to follow his example.

A friend of mine in Wellington was a stand up comic, an occupation very similar to preaching really. But he specialised in imitating Sam Hunt, the poet. He got so good at writing poems and producing them like Sam Hunt that a number of the local pubs and wine bars in Wellington asked him to go and speak. After a time his reputation spread. Until the day came when he knew he had made it. There at the back of the bar was none other than ... you guessed it, Sam Hunt himself, with a little note book and pen. At the break my friend Matthew went up to him. "Hi Sam, what are you doing here?" "Looking for new material." he said. He had become so much like Sam Hunt, that even Sam Hunt could learn how to be more like himself by being with him.

We are not called to be like Sam Hunt, but to be like Jesus Christ. We are to take on his way of being. This is what it means to be a follower of Jesus. That Jesus' love becomes our love, his mercy our mercy, his forgiveness our forgiveness, his joys and desires and words become our desires and joys and words. This is surely what Saint Paul meant when he said, "I no longer live but Christ lives in me." To learn from the teacher, from the original, this is exactly what being a follower of Jesus means.

To start with Christians weren't called Christians they were simply called 'followers of the Way'. The term Christian was first used by non-believing townspeople in Antioch as semi-mockery (Acts 11:19-26). They watched on and could see the caring love the 'followers of the Way' had for others. They could see the loving bonds that held them together. They could see the joy that they had and the simple trust. So like Jesus was their behaviour that others called them Christians - "little Christs."

When people live alongside us, are we so much like Jesus? Is it as if they are living with a little version of Christ? When people work alongside us are we so much like Jesus that it's like being with a little Christ? When we laugh and when we cry, are we so much like Jesus it's like being with a little Christ?

To put it in a modern way, being a Christian makes us a better person.

As soon as we begin down this road of Christianity we immediately know our need of God's grace and like Andrew and Simon and James and John we need to stick as close as we can to Jesus.

As we journey into this New Year we are reminded by St Teresa of Avila...

Christ has no body now but yours.

No hands, no feet on earth but yours.

Yours are the eyes through which He looks compassion on this world.

Yours are the feet with which He walks to do good.

Yours are the hands through which He blesses all the world.

Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body.

Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

Yours are the eyes with which He looks with love on this world. Christ has no body now on earth but ours.

The ultimate compliment would surely be like the one my friend had from Sam Hunt: to come to the end of our journey and to know the embrace of our Saviour, who says "You lived just like I would have."