

Reading: Mark 1:14-20

And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.”

I wonder if Simon and Andrew had any idea what they were agreeing to that day beside the lake. Mark records for us that they immediately left their nets and followed Jesus. We can't overestimate the commitment following Jesus was for them. Fishing for them wasn't a hobby, but a necessity for their survival.

My family are pretty cruel and make jokes at my attempts at fishing. It is true that the Department of Conservation doesn't need to worry that the fishing stocks will be depleted when I front up. I can't even catch a cold.

Jesus is beginning to gather his disciples around him. The love that Simon and Andrew see in Jesus draws them like a magnet to want to follow him. The task he gives them is simple; catch people. Never have two words been so faithfully actioned. Like a pandemic of love, the good news of Jesus spread first around the Judean countryside, then into the towns and cities, eventually it spread across the Roman empire and then on into the whole world. Beginning with Jesus the super spreader and carrying on with a handful of disciples, no borders, no quarantines, no vaccines would keep this pandemic from spreading. Jesus is the hope of the world. In him we can find meaning, fulfillment, peace and eternal life. The world was ready for it. The news that there was no longer slave nor free, male nor female, Jew nor gentile but that all are equal children of God, spread like wildfire. You and me and 2.5 billion other people can trace the hope we have to two simple words given to two simple fishermen: “Catch people.”

What Jesus said to those two disciples long ago he is saying to us: “Catch people. Draw out your net of love and catch people.” The problem I have with these words of Jesus is that they sound a lot like a word that we never say in

polite Anglican society - evangelism. To be an evangelist we need to dress like we have just escaped from Gloriavale, have really bad teeth and spend all day at the mall handing out leaflets. Evangelism is what we hope other people will do for us, maybe the Baptists. A generation ago it was easy. We sent missionaries to dark far-off places to spread this pandemic of love. Now of course there are more Anglicans in just one African country, Nigeria, than in North America, Europe and New Zealand combined.

In Jonah from our first reading, we have someone who can give us all hope. He is the grumpiest evangelist in all history. Called to bring a message of hope to the Assyrians who are his hated enemies, he does what most of us would do, he takes a fast boat in the complete opposite direction. But God's love continues to call him back. In a storm he is thrown from the boat and a giant fish swallows him. Inside the fish he can hear a choir singing. On asking why this is, the response comes, "Everyone sings in Wales!" Eventually and reluctantly, he gives the shortest sermon ever to the Assyrians. In Hebrew it is just five words long. To his disgust everyone repents, from the king right down to the peasants. Even the cows put on sackcloth. By the end of the book, he hates God for being so forgiving, and he sits under a bush hoping he might die. The story is recorded for us to ask a question of ourselves. Do we hate God for being so forgiving, so generous in his love? Are we the grumpy reluctant evangelists of God?

To live out these words of Jesus directed to us today, we need to examine our attitude to evangelism, to catching people. Let me tell you a story.

Every day, at exactly the same time, Margaret would go to her bathroom cabinet, open it and take out a huge bottle of castor oil. Then she would head to the kitchen to get a tablespoon. At the sound of the drawer opening, Patches, her Yorkshire terrier would run and hide - sometimes under the bed, at other times in the bath, under the table or behind a chair.

A long time ago someone had convinced Margaret that Patches would have strong teeth, a beautiful coat and long life if he were given a spoonful of castor oil every day. So as an act of love every 24 hours she cornered Patches, pinned him down, pried open his mouth and poured a spoonful of castor oil down his little doggy throat. Neither Patches nor Margaret enjoyed this daily wrestling match.

Then one day in the middle of their battle royal, Patches sent the bottle of castor oil flying across the room. It was a victory for the dog. Margaret had to let him go and get a towel to start mopping it all up.

When she got back, she was utterly amazed. There was Patches licking up the spilled castor oil with a look of satisfaction that only a dog can have. Margaret began to laugh uncontrollably. In one moment, it all made sense. Patches liked castor oil he just hated being pinned down and having it poured down his throat.

Evangelism has become a dirty word because we imagine we have to give people something they don't want; in ways they don't want to receive it. Rather evangelism is sharing something that people actually want - in ways they want to receive it. Not against their wills but gracefully. No longer is it to be a battle royal, rather it is an opportunity to discover for themselves a life-giving relationship with Jesus. We have the opportunity of a lifetime to invite our friends and neighbours to the opening of St Peter's. Why not take an invitation or two? Catching people - evangelism is simply sharing the abundant life we have discovered in Jesus. The question isn't should we make Christians? Jesus has told us we must. The question isn't can I leave it to someone else? The job is too big to leave it to someone else. The real question is do I believe that I have good news worth sharing? In Jesus we have found unconditional love for all people, joy, peace, and abundant life. In Christ we have found fullness of life. Why wouldn't we want to share it?

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