

SERMON: 24 January 2021 – Rev Alistair Cowper

A call to live differently

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

Mark 1:14-20

When day comes, we ask ourselves where can we find light in this never-ending shade?

The loss we carry, a sea we must wade.

We've braved the belly of the beast.

We've learned that quiet isn't always peace,
and the norms and notions of what "just" is isn't always justice.

And yet, the dawn is ours before we knew it.

(Amanda Gorman, *The Hill We Climb*)

The calling of the first disciples is a call to follow Jesus and live the Jesus Way, as opposed to any other way, especially the way of empire.

As one church minister put it recently,

“For most of the past 2000 years, however, mission has been hopelessly entangled with the spread of empire, the enforcement of authority and, in more recent times, the survival of a failing institution. We need to go fishing for people—and then get them to sign a Gift Aid declaration—if our church is to avoid closure.

Church and Kingdom overlap (we hope) but are not one and the same. These men are not being invited to join a church, but to follow the leading of God's spirit embodied in a man whose most recent formation had been in the wilderness, not the seminary, and whose harshest criticisms were directed against the religious authorities of his day. He knew his scriptures and valued the traditions of his people, but he wanted others to join him in an active process of rediscovering and re-evaluating what faith is, how it can change us and, through us, change the world” (Spill the Beans, Issue 37).

I've been reading Shane Claiborne's book, *The Irresistible Revolution*, which is his way of describing what it means to love God, love people and follow Jesus.

Indeed that's the slogan of a movement he and others started called 'the simple way', rediscovering the life, joy and fulfilment in simply following the Way of Jesus.

Not that it's that simple. Some of the things they get involved in are costly, but then Jesus made it clear that there is a cost involved in following in his Way; a cross to be taken up.

Often, when people first hear the call to follow Jesus' Way they long for a reclaiming of the simple way of the early church, for example in Acts chapter 2.

There's no doubt the followers of the Way movement in the early church appears to have grown extremely fast in this first 3 centuries.

Church historian Rodney Stark wrote a book called "The Triumph of Christianity" about how in those early centuries it was often the pandemics that helped cause the growth. He says that the pagans all ran away from the pandemics whilst the Jesus followers ran towards those in need (<https://www.biola.edu/blogs/good-book-blog/2020/how-did-early-christians-respond-to-plagues>).

Following Jesus is an invitation to begin to live differently and it begins with good news at home. That's what Jesus did. He went to Galilee to preach good news.

And he met people who were prepared to leave behind their old ways and turn to a new way. Fishermen, who left their nets at once and followed him.

I read an article this week about the fishing industry in Galilee in Jesus' time. In some ways it wasn't unlike our own times - and of course the fishing industry in Scotland is going through a tough time at the moment.

But in Jesus time, the whole of Palestine was under the control of the Roman Empire, and that included the fishing industry. Rather than Simon and Andrew, James and John being simple sole traders, it's likely that they were fishing for Caesar and for the benefit of the rich in the cities.

Under that system, fishermen needed a licence to fish and couldn't only get a licence by joining a syndicate which then exported most of the catch, leaving local communities hungry. That which was sold locally was heavily taxed by the empire and most couldn't afford what they had been able to depend on in the days before empire.

And so in that context, Jesus' call to "come, be my disciples and I will show you how to fish FOR people" is a radical call to turn away from a corrupt, exploitative way of life to a new Way.

This is why the early followers of Jesus were known as followers of the Way, for it was a new way of living in the face of empire and the way of the world.

Repentance then is to turn away from the corruption and exploitation of empire - be it Roman or Assyrian or any other worldly empire - to a new socio-economic Way of life with Jesus at the centre as the Supreme Example of how to live out this new Way, and with whose Spirit lies all the energy and wisdom needed to make it happen.

I paraphrase Mark 1:17 by having Jesus say, The time is now and the Kingdom of God is coming near, turn from the sinful ways of the world and trust the Good News to live differently.

But it's not just a call for us to turn our backs on corruption and exploitation etc it's as much a call to help people who are caught up in the nets of this world's corruption, exploitation, poverty, violence, disease, or suffering the effects of climate change, racism, sexism, homophobia etc etc.

How can we wrestle and pray and help to free people who are entangled in nets so that they too might discover the good news that Jesus began and wants to continue in them?

How can we learn from Jesus to fish not just *for* people but *on behalf of* people, and *for the benefit of* people?

The Spirit of Jesus will show us, day by day.

The Spirit that says learn from me. You are my disciples. Come. I will make you

(Pause)

May we have the courage to follow.

Collect:

Almighty God, by grace alone you call us, and accept us in your service. Strengthen us by your Spirit, and make us worthy of your call.

Amen.