

Sermon for Epiphany 3

Jonah 3.1-5,10, 1 Corinthians 7:29-31, Mark 1:14-20.

Giving up

Life is often strange when we reflect back – how we end up where we are, with who, and doing what. In our society and culture freedom and choice is everything. Rightly, we encourage our children to try things to explore what they might be good at and enjoy. At school and home, education means drawing out what might be there – training; the honing and drilling of a particular skill will come later – or should.

As a young boy I wanted at various times to be an actor or a politician and I now joke that I find myself a priest which is often a combination of the two. This week's radio talk that caught my attention was a "one to one" interview on Tuesday. You should know by now that all my radios are tuned to radio 4 and it would certainly be my desert island luxury. In the programme journalists are given the freedom of choice to interview someone who interests them – there we are freedom and choice have neatly slipped in again.

The person being interviewed was a fine young Norwegian opera singer – Peter (Egersborg). I say singer not star because he had given up trying to be a star and that was the point of the interview. He writes a blog "giving up on my dream" and finding life fulfilment in other ways (though he hasn't stopped singing). He is still discerning what constitutes success and failure. We tell our children and young folk they can do anything they want as long as they work, want, dream and try hard enough. What does it do for the psyche when it doesn't happen? Big question.

Last week's readings were about vocation – being called- the great question of all humans – what is my life for and for whom is it for? And so are this weeks. Last week I reminded you that this year is year B – focussing on the Gospel of Mark but the Gospel of John got squidged in and now today we see again what I meant by the call of the disciples being very different in John and Mark - the account in Mark of Jesus meeting the first disciples can seem almost casual and their following of him, abrupt and followed by a gradual process of awakening. Whereas in John they seem to have been prepared by John the Baptist and are now ready to follow and abide.

Mark is undoubtedly writing early and you don't need to tell folk what they already know. But Mark is deeper and more subtle than we often credit. The impact of John the Baptist here is upon Jesus's own vocation – the arrest of John calls time for Jesus to be openly who he already is.

The society of Jesus's time was very different to ours education and schooling were not for all – folk were multigenerational in their professions and ways of life. We have

only the vestige this in some of your surnames Potter, Taylor, Tinker, Cartwright, Cooper, Mason, Gardener etc. I vaguely remember a story of The Queen on a visit to South Africa being confronted by a haughty and pushy madam who introduced herself “I’m Diana Butcher of the Butchers of Durban” a most estimable profession I’m sure was her majesty’s gently crushing reply before moving onto to more normal folk.

We should I guess have some sympathy for Zebedee and whoever else were left – the call of Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John is not a condemnation of those left behind but we cannot overestimate the magnitude of the new beginning for the disciples. Whilst in ancient societies such change is rare it did happen and is wholly biblical – even Zebedee would have recognised the echo with the call of Abraham in the book of Genesis. “leave your country and your father’s home and go to the land that I will show you” Being called out and sent into is one of the earliest biblical actions of God. Apostle may mean messenger and being sent but apo mean **away from** out of something. Apo is a prefix not a suffix – it comes first before any sending or messaging.

This should add weight and gravity to what Jesus actually says – repent – believe the Good News. The Kingdom of God is close at hand. What Jesus says to the fishers he says to us all. We will understand easily repentance in terms of sinning or doing bad things but this call away from and out of is much deeper though Mark uses few words. It is away from social, political and religious ways that were destroying Israel’s vocation – her calling in the world (that is what the wonderful story of Jonah is all about). The call to repentance is away from all that replaces loyalty to God and the temple and laws will feature large in this with the question who are they serving God or Man?

We do well to remember that societies and nations have callings in a week past that has seen a new president of the United States and as our society grapples with issues of immense gravity. The telling of the call to the kingdom in Mark is not just about a visit to a divine careers advisor.

Our Old Testament reading is from the Book of Jonah. It is a little book and hugely powerful as well as being very funny. It’s worth reading especially if you have made it as an opera star or are at the height of success in some career or other – its God saying to Jonah your vocation and calling is not just about you and of course Jonah represents the vocation of Israel within the world. Like a spoilt child and prima donna Jonah slumps off on his own and tells God what will and won’t work.

Three days Jonah is in the belly of the whale and three days Our Lord is dead in the tomb. The lord of love and life will not be defeated. The question is will we use our lives to celebrate his victory share his risen life and in his calling. The Kingdom of God is close at hand because Jesus is the Kingdom – he is what he does and does what he is. To follow Him, may mean leaving your nets too or it may mean using them in very different ways. But whatever your age and situation, your worldly success or failure -

it's not just about you. If the dream is just about you – well best follow Peter, not the fisherman, but our fine opera singer and give up on it and starting dreaming and working for a world that is at the heart of the Kingdom which Jesus offers – and is open to the very best and the very worst of singers. The Simon Peter probably wasn't the best fisherman and he wasn't always the best disciple either – but Jesus loved him and Peter said ok I'll try. He kept on trying and I pray that you and I won't give up on that and will do the same.

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