

## Sermon – Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> January 2020 – 9.30 am

I was quite pleased with myself when I was Christmas shopping this year. I went early on a Saturday morning, the shops were quite empty, and I was making good progress through my list. It was time to hit the toy shop to find something for my 15 month old nephew. I find toy shops a bit daunting. There is just so much stuff, and because I don't see my nephew very often, it's quite hard to know what to get. There's that balance between not wanting to duplicate what he already has, getting something he'll enjoy, and hopefully also something that will last for a while. So when I came across some magnetic picture blocks, I thought I'd done quite well, especially as they were for children over 15 months – maximum utility, I thought. The blocks came in a box about this size, and the picture on the outside showed various animals that could be made with the parts of the pictures on the sides of the blocks.

Except that once the gift was opened, and my brother opened the box, there were four magnetic blocks, each about 3 or 4 centimetres cubed. It's fair to say I felt a little cheated. Of course, as most of you will know, the main came from unwrapping the parcel, tearing the paper and then playing with the box, so all was not lost. But I was reminded once again of the ways in which publicity and packaging can promise so much and deliver so little.

Which is why I love the stories of Jesus. Because this is the real deal. And when you have the real deal, you don't need gimmicks or strap lines; colourful packaging or wild promises.

We are so bombarded by advertising – we have become so used to hearing things that we simply can't believe – that I wonder whether we need to take a little time when we read the scriptures to remember that they simply aren't like that. To shake off our usual defences and allow ourselves to fully engage with what we are hearing. To gently acknowledge that this good news really isn't too good to be true.

And part of what can help us is the fact that we have four different Gospels. Those of you who were here last week will remember John's wonderful sermon about Jesus's call to his first disciples as described in John's gospel. The way Jesus asked Andrew and Simon Peter what they were looking for, in response to which they asked where he was staying, and Jesus said, "Come and see." There is a thread running through John's gospel about seeing and believing, which we encounter in this story of calling.

This morning's reading is somewhat different. If you expected to find in the gospels a detailed factual account of events exactly as they happened you might be somewhat perplexed. But that is not their purpose. The gospels are telling us the good news. There are great similarities which give us some confidence in the events they describe, but there are also differences.

And so here, in Matthew's gospel, we hear of Jesus proclaiming, "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near." And when he reaches Andrew and Simon Peter, he simply says, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." And immediately they follow him.

It's quite a different story, isn't it, from the one we heard last week? Those of you who have experienced the more fire and brimstone side of the church (hopefully more from the past than the present) may find Jesus's proclamation uncomfortable. And yet the meaning of the word translated "repent" is to turn around. This is not a call to guilt and self flagellation, but rather an invitation to

recognise that we might be on the wrong path – that we might be going in the wrong direction – that we might be focused on the wrong things – and to turn around. To find the right path. To make a different choice. To place something else at the centre of our lives.

It's quite hard to imagine what Andrew and Simon Peter made of Jesus's suggestion that he would make them fish for people. Perhaps the way people were drawn to Jesus helped them to make some connection, or perhaps they were completely baffled and yet still inspired. All we are told is that they followed. Immediately. As do James and John, the sons of Zebedee.

I wonder what we are to make of these somewhat different stories of the call of the first disciples. You might find yourself wondering what actually happened. And some of you might really want to know. Which was it? Which were the actual words that Jesus used on this particular occasion? On the other hand, you might be the kind of person who finds yourself creating the kind of story that can integrate both versions. Well, Jesus was preaching, teaching and calling on people to follow. Exactly what he said to each individual at a given time is less relevant than the overall picture. At times Jesus was heard to say, "come and see"; at others he used similar words to John the Baptist, "repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near"; his invitation was always to follow, to spend time with him. Perhaps individuals heard the words that they needed to connect with them.

I also wonder whether there is another dimension. The story of Jesus is historical, but it has never been only historical. This is an eternal story, for everyone, everywhere, across the generations. During his earthly life, Jesus did indeed call individuals to follow him, but the call to discipleship is as significant to us today as it was then. The call to follow is one we need to keep hearing. Our relationship with God is the most important one in our lives.

Whenever I hear the various stories about the disciples throughout the gospels, I am struck by something new. I hear something different, either because my experiences have changed or because I am in a different situation, or perhaps a different mood. What never changes is the ability of the scriptures to connect. To encourage me, to challenge me, to ask questions of me.

Just as the disciples themselves were capable of acts of great faithfulness, alongside acts of doubt and betrayal, so it is with us that our life of discipleship is rarely a smooth one. Sometimes we need to hear admonishment; sometimes we need support and nurture. We hear both of those – and so much more – in the life, words and work of Jesus. And always set in the context of love.

Amen