

Sermon 6 February 2022 – Calling Cockfield

Isa 6. 1-8, Luke 5.1-11

Today we have had two well-known Bible passages; the vision of Isaiah in which he volunteers for service and the miraculous catch of fish, resulting in the call of Simon Peter. I am often asked whether I can dust off an earlier sermon that I had preached on the same familiar passage. In reply I explain that one of the surprising pleasures of preaching on a familiar passage is discovering something new that one had not noticed before. Has anyone had that experience this morning during either of the readings?

What struck me, for the first time, was that Luke assumed we knew who Simon was and Simon was not the least bit surprised when Jesus casually stepped into his boat.

At a recent teaching day on Luke's Gospel, our two Bishops explained that Luke wrote his gospel after Mark and Matthew had written theirs. In the full knowledge of what they had written, he carried out his own research to supplement their accounts. Having carried out his research, Luke wanted to convey the truth of Jesus through stories. The Bishops challenged us to follow this example and use more stories in our preaching.

The story of the miraculous catch, preceding the call of Simon, is one of the stories that Luke told. It is therefore surprising that there was no attempt to introduce Simon or explain who he was, in contrast to the abrupt description of the call in the other two gospels, and we might have expected some explanation.

In fact, we have already come across Simon Peter in the previous chapter. There is a short account of Jesus entering Simon's house after leaving the synagogue, finding Simon's mother-in-law was suffering from a high fever and curing her. So clearly Simon and Jesus knew each other and Simon was presumably grateful that his mother -in- law had been cured.

The Isaiah passage is about Isaiah's call, albeit in a very different way, so I began to think about people being called, both historically and currently. Just about every significant step in the advance of Christianity and Judaism is as a result of someone being called; Abraham, Moses, King David, Isaiah and other prophets, John the Baptist, Paul. Then after Biblical times we have had a number of saints like St Augustine called to bring Christianity to England. All sorts of different people, backgrounds, and education; all sorts of different ways in which they were called.

Returning to today's two stories, whilst the backgrounds to the callings were very different, I spotted one thing in common. You may have spotted the same thing or something different. I learned that neither Isaiah nor Simon were strangers to their caller. I have already explained that Jesus had previously been invited into Simon Peter's house and had cured his mother-in-law. Isaiah had had at least two earlier visions before the call described today. He was therefore used to hearing the Lord and conveying a message or prophecy. Today, people are still being called, but the examples that I know about involve people, who have also been in regular touch with God, or who have been arguing with him, rather like Paul had, before he was struck down on the road to Damascus. These examples mainly involve ordinary people who are called to use their gifts in extraordinary ways.

Nearly 300 years ago, John Wesley was a newly ordained cleric who sailed to Georgia to be chaplain to a colony of settlers. The mission was a disaster and he returned a broken man longing to have the same unshakeable faith as some Moravian pastors he had met on the journey. He knew his theological training was not enough to give him the faith he needed and after prayer on 24 May 1738, he had an experience that changed everything. He felt called to Bristol where he started his remarkable preaching ministry amongst the poor and struggling that brought about profound change. Many historians have credited his ministry as saving England from a revolution similar to the French Revolution.

John Newton was a hard drinking sailor and slave-trader, but in his early twenties began to read the Bible. He accepted Christ as his saviour on 10 March 1748, but like Simon Peter still had a lot to learn. It was only some time later that he heard God telling him to campaign against the slave trade.

I also have two very recent examples. In 2000, Richard Addington was an Anglican priest who had been forced to retire from parish work in Suffolk, due to leukaemia, which had been diagnosed as terminal. He then had a reprieve and asked God what he could do with his new lease of life. Swine fever had just broken out crippling pig farmers, many of whom were in East Anglia. He felt called to organise a hardship fund to support them. Within a very short time, with the help of Sally Fogden and others, he raised a large sum of money which proved a lifeline for farmers facing debt and loss of their herds. No sooner than that crisis was over than the country was engulfed in the largest outbreak of foot and mouth disease for thirty years. The Addington fund stepped up to help. Finally in 2002 there was severe flooding in Somerset, and Richard Addington and his fund was organising the shipment of hay and fodder. He died that same year, but the fund continues to support those working in agriculture facing hardship.

Again Richard had been a faithful follower of Christ for many years, but it was only when he was feeling very vulnerable that God used him in a remarkable way.

My final modern example is Richard Stainer and his call to ordained ministry. For several years Richard had been the Bishop's world development advisor and in that roll spoke in many church services, but he did not have a licence to preach. In 2018, he applied to be licenced as an elder with permission to preach. To most people's amazement the interviewing panel turned him down, so Sharon appealed to Bishop Mike. Richard was duly asked to meet him and they discussed the issue. Seemingly out of the blue, Richard was asked if he felt called to ordination as a priest under an accelerated programme. He was quite taken aback, but prayed about the call, discussed it with Christine and then tested it by talking to Sharon and several others. He concluded that the call was for him.

Knowing that God is still calling his followers, what lessons can we learn from our two readings?

Both Isaiah and Simon Peter were prepared to listen and to respond. Simon lets Jesus into his boat, when he was busy and probably fed up after a futile night's fishing. He then agrees to go out again, even though, as an experienced fisherman, he knows that the fish only usually swim around in shoals at night.

Both Isaiah and Simon were caught by surprise. Simon's nets are so full of fish his boat is in danger of sinking. He realises he is in the presence of divine power he is so amazed at the size of the catch.

Both reckoned that they were unworthy for the task. Isaiah calls out "woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips". Simon begs Jesus "go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man". Jesus understands his fear and tells Peter, not to be afraid. Both men then applied themselves to the task God had given them, with great effect.

We will see a similar pattern in our modern examples. John Wesley pleaded with God for help in his ministry, before he was surprised by the call to Bristol. He was not at all sure that his skills were right for outdoor preaching. John Newton took some convincing by God to oppose the slave trade, but once convinced, was courageous in his opposition.

I don't know much about Richard Addington's call, but a few years ago, I was on a Diocesan training day and was seated next to his widow. She was delightfully self-effacing and it took some time before I realised who she was.

Whilst clearly proud of Richard's achievement, she gave the impression that both of them were surprised by the way the work of the fund took off and the help and resources that were provided. God used his last two years in a remarkable way.

What about our own Richard? He thought he had found his post-retirement vocation, working for the Diocese and doing some acting work, but God had other ideas. He was bemused at being turned down for a preaching role and like Simon Peter, after a fruitless night catching nothing, Richard was frustrated and fed up. Then the unexpected call came to be ordained. Like the others, he was not sure he had the right skills, but he tested the call by taking the advice of people he respected. He then did not shirk the call and knuckled down to two years hard training.

These examples show us how God calls ordinary people to discipleship and mission. Those in our examples were called, in the state they were. They were aware of their

shortcomings. Jesus was not put off by Simon's sinfulness and encourages him to become fishers of men. God is not put off by our shortcomings.

Throughout the Bible we see that human sin, failure, and inadequacy are no obstacles to God's call. God calls imperfect people to do God's work, people who are aware of their unworthiness and are often doubting and resistant to God's call. We will all probably feel inadequate. I certainly feel inadequate for the Worshipping Together task I have been set. If we are to do our bit to reverse the steady decline in church attendance, God's mission for us is urgent. We are called right now, not when we think we might become worthy enough. I recently read that the Church was like a football match; A crowd of spectators, desperately in need of exercise watch 22 players desperately in need of a rest. If you fear that you are a spectator, spend time listening to God and seeing where he is calling you. You might be surprised!