



Sermon: - 22nd January 2017

Will you come and follow me...?

1 Corinthians 1: 10-18; Matthew 4: 12-23

Friday marked the inauguration of Donald Trump as the 45th president of the United States of America. The inauguration theme was “Uniquely American” and was meant to stress the peaceful transition of power and that the American people were united behind an enduring Republic, however that unity was not in evidence in the line-up of artists who were approached to perform at the inauguration. Many famous performers declined the invitation, others accepted it to begin with then withdrew and there were demonstrations against his presidency. An event which is meant to be a sign of hope instead is characterised by controversy and division. Where is the hope then?

In the church’s year we are still in the season of Epiphany; as Matthew tells us, “the people living in darkness have seen a great light, on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned”. There is the source of hope! The light has dawned. That light, of course, was Jesus, and in today’s reading we hear how, at the start of his Ministry, Jesus calls his disciples through whom his message of hope was to be taken into the world. The NIV reads, “Come follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will send you out to fish for people.” It doesn’t quite have the same ring as, “I will make you fishers of men!” Does it? Although it has advantages; it might save a little confusion! There was a little boy who heard the story of the calling of the first disciples in Sunday school. He was puzzled by it and when he went home he said to his mum, “Why did Jesus say, ‘I will make you vicious old men!’” Fishers of men, a strange call, but the fishermen followed, if Matthew is to be believed, immediately!

Do you believe in love at first sight? William Shakespeare, in Twelfth Night, suggests “Whoever loves, loves at first sight.” A minister friend once told me that she married her husband within six weeks of meeting him; they are still together 30 years later. I think that qualifies as love at first sight. Or take the case of a friend’s daughter who came home from the pub one night and told her parents, “I’m going to have to stop going out with Dave!” who was her boyfriend of the time. “Why is that?” asked her parents. “Because I’ve just met the man I’m going to marry.” Four years later they are indeed engaged to be married; it took him a little while to catch up! Love at first sight! Psychologists argue over it, romantics believe in it. But whatever you think about it there are numerous examples of life

changing relationships which begin in an instant. And the relationships we read about today would fall into that category because I think there is a sense in which we could call what happened to the disciples when they first met Jesus, love at first sight. They met him, he called to them, and they left everything to follow him. What was it about this man that engendered that extraordinary response? We spoke last week of the power of the look that Jesus gives. How the gospel accounts of his encounters with people paint pictures of an almost hypnotic quality in his eyes when he looks at them. And this incident today is another such. Jesus spoke, and they followed! Jesus called and they responded.

And, of course, Jesus calls us too. That is one of the reasons why we are here this morning, because we answered that call, we became Christians, perhaps we joined the church, we became part of the body of Christ. And this is what I want to consider this morning, how we answer that call of Jesus; what it means to answer that call. Recently two different people have said to me, "I don't think I'm a very good Christian!" So I want to think a bit this morning about what it is to be a Christian.

At its most basic level to be a Christian is simply to be a follower of Jesus, to be part of the body of Christ. Joining the church doesn't make you a Christian but for many people it's a natural response to becoming a Christian; the desire to publicly confess faith, and formally become united with your Christian brothers and sisters. So you can be a Christian without necessarily joining the church, but is difficult to be a Christian without joining together with other Christians on a regular basis. As I commented last week being a Christian is one of those things you can't do alone. You can't really be counted as a member of a body if you never meet up with that body, and most of us need the encouragement of other Christians to keep our faith alive. However, the comment, "I don't think I'm a very good Christian!" implies that there is more to being a Christian than just coming to church or joining with others in worship, and certainly for the disciples following Christ meant a radical change in their lifestyle.

So what does it mean to be a Christian? Before you start to get anxious that I'm about to suggest a radical change in your lifestyle, I don't think that that's what Jesus calls us to, necessarily. Clearly there are those who are called to a very specific ministry which does involve a change in lifestyle. Mother Theresa answered the call to be a nun and that radically altered her life. Perhaps it's people like her that bring us to think that we are not very good Christians! Because she left everything behind for the sake of her faith and we haven't. But she was called to do that, and we are not!

I was called to ministry, and I have mentioned in the past that I had two different reactions to this, one was to think, “I can’t do that!”, and the other was to think, “I can’t not to do that!”, and I do feel that in ministry I have come home, and I feel fulfilled, and I feel that I’m doing what God wants me to do. It didn’t require me to give up to any great extent lifestyle I had. Rather it felt like freedom within the lifestyle I had! But does answering that call make me a good Christian? Not necessarily.

So what is a good Christian? Someone who answers the call of Jesus, yes, it’s that! But what else is it?

Perhaps it would be helpful to consider the problem by looking at what it’s not! I firmly believe that it’s not about following rules and regulations; that it’s not necessarily about always trying to do what we think is the right thing; that it’s not about thinking “the right things”, saying “the right things”, and “doing the right things” as if there was an obvious “right thing” in every situation. Donald Trump’s inauguration included prayers by six different members of the clergy but that will not guarantee that his presidency will be blessed by God, nor that he will necessarily therefore make the right decisions. He was sworn in on the same Bible used at the inauguration of Barack Obama and also on his own personal childhood Bible, but none of these things, good and right although they may be, make him a Christian.

Nor do I think being a Christian is about doing things that we don’t want to do, or find difficult or painful. Yes, God will challenge us, but there is a view that the Christian life has to be hard and unpleasant or we are not doing it properly and I don’t believe that. Jesus said he came to give us life and give and give us life abundantly; that doesn’t sound to me like a life full of things that are disagreeable and painful. God’s challenges, in my experience, are life-giving.

So if that’s what it’s not, what is it? When Jesus calls, he simply says, “follow me!” There is no further instruction until he tells us that the whole law is contained within the first two commandments, love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, with all your strength and love your neighbour as you love yourself. So being a Christian presumably is about following Jesus and loving God and loving our neighbour, but there is also that little phrase, “loving ourselves”.

I think it is too often overlooked. I would question whether we can love God or love our neighbour if we do not love ourselves. But then what does that mean? Because clearly it doesn't mean simply always following the whims of every passing thought, indulging ourselves, putting our own needs before the needs of others in every circumstance. Rather I think it means accepting ourselves, being at peace with ourselves. Accepting our limitations, accepting our faults and foibles, accepting our weaknesses. Accepting also our strengths, our gifts, our skills. I think that when we accept these things, when we love ourselves, when we don't have anything to prove, we can relax, we can be comfortable in our own skin and then we can be free to love God and love one another. It is in the absence of that love ourselves that hate and fear for others grows. Concerns about the Trump presidency centre around concerns about the promotion of the politics of hate and fear and these have their root in a lack of love for oneself, a lack of security in who we are as individuals so we feel threatened by those who are different. So being a good Christian is about yes, loving God but also about loving ourselves and in the security of that being able to love one another.

Jesus calls us to follow him. He calls us into a loving relationship which includes loving ourselves. But it's not a once for all call; every day Jesus calls us afresh into that loving relationship. He calls us to follow him, and then he calls us to follow him some more, and then he calls us to follow him again! And the more we follow him, the more we love him, the more we love ourselves, the more we love others, and that is where we find this Epiphany hope for the world.