

Sermon - Izzy McDonald-Booth, Sunday 22nd January 2023.

May I speak in the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen

In this season of Epiphany we're hearing the gospel narratives that tell the start of Jesus's ministry. After the focus on His birth, the Holy family, the visit of the Magi - and the presentation of Jesus in the temple, we move to Jesus as an adult.

In Matthew's gospel this feels quite sudden – we're thrust into the reality of him calling his disciples away from their work, leaving their fishing boats - and then pretty quickly Jesus starting his preaching and teaching ministry.

This is a gospel reading of two halves. We have a substantial extract from Isaiah with all its foretelling of fulfilments of scripture – Matthew's always keen to weave these extracts into the text; they would have been understood and recognised by the Jewish audience he was writing for.

Jesus then begins to preach his first words 'repent for the Kingdom of heaven has come near'. We often hear Jesus speaking of the Kingdom. Kingdom of heaven here, or Kingdom of God in other gospels - which are essentially the same thing.

We then move quite abruptly into Jesus calling his disciples and asking them to follow him. They are obedient servants and do just as he asks. They leave their boats and go. We might ask why they respond in that way? There are no words of encouragement and persuasion, no reasons given, just a simple – **Come, follow me.**

Jesus here is getting straight to the point and asking a simple question. We might worry about having a calling to something we are unsure about or being called into faith, we might indeed worry about people being coercive or overly keen on persuading us. We might also worry about evangelism and what that implies. The fact is that in this gospel one question is being asked and there is only a **yes or no** answer.

A prayerful and straight to the heart ask for us to **act** on our faith. We could say this is a classic call and response narrative.

Evangelism and mission are problematic words right now. Evangelism has got itself in a pickle with being too manipulative, too associated with who has the power in a situation – and even who might be taking advantage. The word mission is becoming associated with our past and the negative associations of empire. I would argue both of these terms reference a power imbalance at their heart.

And yet mission does describe and mean a 'going out' into the world to spread the word, to let people know they are dearly loved by God.

But if we come back to the text of Matthew's gospel we leave all that behind, all of our hand wringing over terminology. There is a simple question and a simple answer. All our associations are just that – created by us and tie us in knots.

We are called to share our faith – but what does that mean? I would suggest it doesn't mean persuading others with words that they are wrong and we are right. It doesn't mean saying we have all the answers.

A long time ago a friend, who isn't a church goer asked me why I never talked about my faith. They assumed that I wanted it as my private treasured thing - **that it wasn't for sharing.**

I was so concerned about being mocked and judged I had decided sharing my faith was a bad idea. I had failed to see the person in front of me interested in why my belief in God was important to me. I think this is true for many people.

I would also suggest that all the things we do as a church, - do actually tell others about what we believe. The pastoral care team, the Friday café where we particularly welcome those with a dementia, Little Saints, the visiting of care homes, the care we have for one another within our church community when life gets hard... I would argue all these things are expressions of faith and show others what we believe in.

These things are more important in our modern world than ever before. Removing ourselves from the news, from politics – just for a moment and seeing what we can do in our **own** lives.

For those who follow church news, this last week has been a challenge. The senior leadership of the church of England has had much to say on issues of gender, sexuality, and marriage. We will hopefully be offering services of blessing for couples of the same sex who have had a civil marriage. For many, this doesn't go far enough – many people think we need to be offering marriage to couples of the same gender. Many other people disagree. As a church community right here we need to remember that sharing the Good News means being honest about all of this, sharing what we believe and sharing that welcome to all people. Being upfront about what we believe as an inclusive church.

All of these issues go to the heart of what it means to be human, what it means **to love** someone. Sometimes the church gets it right, - and sometimes it gets it wrong. What we need to hold onto now is our own faith in God and our own expression of that faith and what that means **here and now** for us.

When we think about mission, when we think about good works, we need to be a humble people, a people who **listen** to others. As the theologian Douglas Hare says: when mission works we are able to share a faith that is exciting enough to be contagious. We don't **need** to be persuasive, we need to be open, honest, prayerful, and humble.

When we reflect on this passage in Matthew's gospel, we are challenged. What does it mean if we are called? What does it mean if we don't respond? What indeed does it mean if we do respond? Going into the unknown is not an easy decision. The disciples followed blindly but completely trusted Jesus.

In this gospel one question is being asked and there is only - a yes or no answer. A prayerful and straight to the heart ask for us to act on our faith in the here and now.

Amen