

## Sermon Archive 278

Sunday 23 January, 2020

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Matthew 4: 12-23

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Last week we reflected on the calling of the first disciples, among whom was Simon, given the nick name "Peter" by Jesus. Peter was to become the spokesman for the disciples, and the first one to work out who Jesus really was. Peter was one of the central, pivotal characters in the early gospel story. And indeed, last week we did reflect on how it all began for him. The story was set down by the river, where John had been baptizing - flowing water and reeds blowing in the breeze. The story then moved to a quiet evening at home with Jesus, taking off the shoes, resting at the end of the day, sheltering beneath the roof of hospitality. And under the banner of "come and see", we thought about faith as a journey into wonder and beauty. "Open my eyes, Lord. Speak your mystery into the deep places of my mind and heart. Let me abide in your peace and wisdom. Together we "come and see". It was a beautiful thing into which Peter was called. The first steps of faith, for the first human being to understand the Lamb of God, were pastoral, blessed, wonderful. It was a lovely reflection.

According to the gospel of John, that's how it was for Peter. But here's another version.

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In this version, it begins with an arrest. John the Baptist is seized by soldiers and thrown in prison. In prison he's going to be interrogated by agents of a paranoid ruler. Eventually the ruler is going to hold a party, get drunk, and order that John's head should be put on a plate. The politics are deranged, decadent, and "truth and process" are not important. Extra-judicial killings for fun! Matthew, the gospel writer, describes this as a time of darkness. He describes the people of this place as "sitting in the

shadow of death". Welcome to the story of faith, Peter; come and see.

If that kind of thing is going on down South, what's a new religious movement going to do? Well, in this version, we're told that Jesus, as soon as he heard that John had been arrested, withdrew ("withdrew" being a posh word for "ran away"). Not only does he run away, he runs away to the more sparsely populated, distant North. He's getting as far off the radar as he can. He grew up in the North - he had family and friends in Nazareth. But I guess his old home is exactly where soldiers might go looking for him. So we're told that he didn't go there. He left Nazareth, and made his base, instead, in the busier, bigger settlement of Capernaum. Maybe there are crowds there that you can hide in. Maybe there are traders who can take you further North if you need to escape. For the second time in his life, Jesus is hiding from authorities, making a base in a place that isn't his home, a political refugee. Come and see, Peter; welcome to the story of faith.

Moving through the crowds, hiding in the bustle of the fishing port, Jesus begins to spread a message. And because Matthew uses the word "proclaim" to describe what Jesus is doing, we get the feeling that it's being done boldly - right in the face. But remember, this is a time of persecution, and Jesus has withdrawn. Maybe some of those who heard the message of Jesus, heard it whispered in their ears, in a shaky voice. Certainly the last one to speak boldly in public is now in prison. In this early stretch of your journey, Peter, mind how you go.

And as you go, don't let the English translation of Jesus put you wrong. In English you'll hear Jesus saying "repent"; and you'll kind of dismiss that as his telling you to say "sorry" - admit to having been a naughty boy. But that's a loss through translation. What Jesus is whispering in your ear, with maybe his shaky, frightened voice, is this: "you've got to change your mind". Not an opinion or two. Not a polishing of a philosophical nicety or three. The whole thing has got to change - a change of mind. Whatever culture has formed your thinking, whatever aspirations have set your agenda, whatever god you've been serving - as best you could - it's ALL got to change. This whispered message, inserted into your ear in a swathing crowd, by a shaking voice - is undoing everything.

Over the next three years, Peter is going to hear Jesus say many things. He'll say "you can't serve two masters - only one, you've got to choose". He's going to say "those people you grew up with aren't really your family; your true family are these frightening ones over here". He's going to say "you have heard it said, but I say to you . . ." He's going to say "Never mind what they say; who do **you** say I am?" Jesus is going to throw Peter into crisis after crisis about how he sees the world, whom he serves, what he believes his life is for, how he expresses the truth he thinks he's seeing. The **change** of mind. Once upon a time he set his nets, caught his fish, sold them at market to pay the bills and feed the children. Is he going to be able to carry on doing that? What does Jesus even mean by "fishing for people"? The change of life, around the change of mind. Peter; this is far from the river and the quiet night at home. This is a very different journey of faith coming out to claim you. It might be better, for you, not to "come and see"; so mind, Peter, mind how you go.

Well, it would seem that Peter doesn't share my hesitation. We're told he immediately leaves his fishing nets, and follows the One who's calling him. Maybe he has no idea about what he's being called into. Maybe he's reckless, or supremely naive. **Or** maybe he's heard Jesus before - been in that crowd to hear the whispers. Maybe he's already had his change of mind - become convinced that arresting prophets, and ruling by fear, and serving self (as they've done down South), is not the way forward for a world made by God. Maybe he's already felt, through the talking, through the anticipation, through the mounting resentment about Herod and the Romans and the cynical leaders of the temple, that something already has begun. What did Jesus say? "The kingdom of God, already, has come near. It's on! Maybe Peter's a coiled spring, long-time waiting for permission to act. Gifted by God with an impatience for the kingdom to begin. Finally activated, straight away to get on with fishing for people - and the changing of other minds! He's heard the old prophecy about light beginning to shine in the darkness, and about people escaping from the shadow. This version of Peter's story has dark days and a difficult world - but he's not

watching how he goes. Immediately they left their nets and followed him. And as they went, proclaiming good news, the people around them are cured from every disease and sickness. Well unless we want the world to be healed, we'd better mind how we go!

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I wonder what you made of that version of the story of the calling of Peter. In some ways, I still prefer the call story that went on down South, set by the river, with the quiet night at home. I like the metaphor of "coming and seeing", the delightful, enlightening journey with Jesus. But **this** version has definite resonances for the world we live in. For our world has its paranoid politicians. Our world has its unjust imprisonments and assassinations. Our world has its whispering crowds and undercurrents. It has withdrawals that are really advances, and its advances that are really withdrawals. It has its dissatisfaction with how things are, and its interplay of manifestos from many masters. It's a complicated stage. So knowing that we are called into the coming near of the new reign - while all that continues - and has its own sway in the world, is important. Faith gets expressed in reality. The healings have to work within the harsh reality of the world. And perhaps it's no surprise - since the greatest sign of the coming of light, of the escaping from the shadow, comes in the form of someone emerging from a tomb - life flourishing only after the death. That will be the culmination of the story of faith of this disciple called Peter.

To the darkness, comes the light. To the shadow of death comes a shining. To the sickness comes the healing. From the nets, the fisherman is called. The holy momentum picks up. Mind how you go, Peter; as we come with you, mind how you go.

A moment of quiet.

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