

Epiphany 3B Sermon, 25 January 2009. Elizabeth Richardson

1 Samuel 3:1-10

Psalm 139:1-12

John 1:43-51

This week, Barak Obama was inaugurated as the 44<sup>th</sup> President of the United States of America. We have heard the speeches and seen the preparation. And what a huge amount of preparation and planning involving many thousands of people went into that day. There were rousing speeches in Obama's campaign for election. Then there was the careful selection of the key staff members. None of those jobs are sinecures so first of all, Obama had to convince people that he was worth following. Similar planning and preparation occurs for the election of leaders in any democratic country. Planning and getting the groundwork right is important in many aspects of life – not just politics. We plan our church activities. We plan for housework and for children starting school and for our careers.

Jesus had to prepare for his ministry too. It didn't just happen. Mark's gospel starts with the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist. Before that, Jesus had grown up and learnt the scriptures and a lot about life. He knew the scriptures well enough to be able to quote them in arguments with the scribes and Pharisees. That is pretty impressive! Just imagine how many Christians today could win a theological argument with biblical scholars!

Jesus was a grown man when he was baptised. He had been working for years. He'd been part of a small community and learnt to appreciate the multitude of issues that affected his neighbours and relatives. He knew what it was to need to have those contracts for work coming in order to put food on the table. He had followed the preaching of his cousin John the Baptist and sometimes travelled to listen to him. All this knowledge was invaluable for his ministry but still he did not start his mission.

The baptism with God's affirmation that this was his beloved son was important but not enough for Jesus to start. John the Baptist was still preaching and baptising people. John was preparing the people for the coming of the messiah. Then John was arrested. That was the cue for Jesus. Jesus could no longer wait but had to act. But Jesus knew that he could not operate alone. In fact he needed quite a retinue of people with him.

He hand picked his close helpers – the disciples. It was a major thing he was asking them to do. They had to leave their families and their jobs. Not only would they have no income but their families were probably left struggling. How old was Zebedee the father of two of them? Fishing is hard physical work so Zebedee may no longer have been able to do much. How many other sons did he have and were they able to continue in the family business of fishing? How many women and children and elderly were dependent on the earnings forgone when James and John as well as Simon and Andrew left to follow Jesus?

As well as the disciples, there were other people who followed and helped or who assisted with accommodation and food at various places – remember Mary and Martha. Some gave enough money for the travelling group to survive on. So you see that there must have been quite a bit of organising to do. Each of those many people supporting Jesus had answered a call from God. Did Zebedee also answer a call from Jesus by saying to his sons ‘go with my blessing, I will manage here without you’? Keeping the home fires burning can also be an answer to the call when it means allowing others to be free to go.

No one could have entered into this ministry without cost. And yet they did join Jesus. Jesus must have been a truly impressive leader right from the start. But let’s not forget that Jesus himself had quite a bit to give up. He also left his family business and set out in faith with no guarantees of success and a comfortable life ahead.

Did he hesitate? That would have been natural seeing as John had been arrested because of his preaching. Would the same happen to Jesus? How did he know that God wanted him to start at that point? We know that Jesus prayed often with God. We can imagine how he prayed after the baptism – what was God asking him to do? Was he up to it? How would he know what God wanted? Sometimes it is the unexpected event that is God’s way of speaking to us. In Jesus’ case it was the arrest of his cousin John the Baptist. The message John had brought was no longer being preached. John’s followers were dismayed. Jesus was called to continue and to take the message of God to its conclusion. It was a big ask and would have needed praying about.

In what ways does God speak to us? That small voice of God can come to any of us. And it does need praying about.

For most of us it is not a call to leave everything to follow – for most of us it is a call to follow while we stay in our families and stay in our jobs. We are asked to follow Jesus by living our ordinary lives in different ways from before. For a few, the call is to leave the comforts of home or job and move. For them it is a call to trust in God to provide while they bring the good news and minister to others.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century there was a medical missionary from America working in India. On one occasion when his daughter, Ida, was visiting on holidays, three men came to the home asking for one of the women to come urgently to help their sick wives. But the only doctor was the father and, in those days Indian women could not be treated by a male doctor. The following day the funerals of all three women went past the missionary’s door. This made such an impact on Ida that she saw it as a call from God. She gave up her ideas of a comfortable family life in America and instead she became one of the very early women to do medicine in America and she returned to India to practice. These days the hospital Dr Ida Scudder started at Vellore in South India is a very large hospital.

God's call can come in so many ways. The call can be quite out of the blue or it can be after much prayer. God's call comes to us just as much as it came to James and John, Simon and Andrew. The kingdom is made up of many people. We mustn't think "I'm not good enough". Everyone is good enough work for the Kingdom of God. The disciples were not perfect as we learn in the gospels. But Jesus and God can work with ordinary imperfect people who truly want to follow. Jesus could not do God's work alone. He needed numerous people to work with him. In the same way today, we need numerous people in the church to work together to bring about something of God's kingdom in our world now. We are not meant to be loners. God needs people to work together for the good of many.

When Jesus did answer the call he entered the district of Galilee and asked people to repent and to believe in the good news of the kingdom of God. He meant them to turn away from the sort of life they were living and to turn towards the life of God. God had said that people had to repent before the kingdom could come. Jesus was asking people then and now to turn their lives around. To stop hankering after material goods and power or the latest must have things and to direct their interest and will to the life of the Kingdom. To make such a change in direction that the old desires no longer have any meaning in their lives.

Today, when we listen to the word of Jesus we are confronted with this call to turn our lives around and to follow. To repent and believe in the good news that Jesus brought and to be part of the Kingdom.

Those first messages of Jesus must have been powerful! They were enough to inspire the fishermen, ordinary everyday sort of men, to just give up their way of life and follow Jesus in a travelling ministry. That was some preaching! And what was it that Jesus was preaching? He was preaching a new order in the world. He was preaching rather revolutionary stuff, the sort of stuff that would get him into trouble with the authorities. God's kingdom is arriving. What would the Roman rulers think of that? It was political and revolutionary talk. What is more, he said that the kingdom had drawn near. There could be no doubting that he was talking dangerous stuff.

What is more, Jesus wanted action from the hearers. He wanted people to work for justice, to work to heal others, to teach others. He didn't just want people to say 'that sounds nice' or 'let's hope it comes soon' or 'someone should do something to help him'.

There are no 'someones' in God's kingdom. Then there were the fishermen and tax collectors and today there is us – you and me. There is no fobbing off the call onto others. It is up to us to respond with love and justice to all.

Amen.