

Epiphany 3 – Wesley 9 and 10.30am services- 26th January 2014

Theme: 'Jesus begins preaching and he finds disciples who follow'

Readings: Matthew 4: 12-23, 1 Corinthians 1:10-18

Introduction

Two different readings for this morning. One where Jesus preaches and his preaching brings forth disciples who 'follow' immediately while the other reading is talking about problems in the early church at Corinth and how Paul goes about seeking unity.

Is there a connection? – 'Yes' – Jesus is the connecting link.

For me, I love these readings because I love fishing, can see links between fishing and the Christian faith and have been at the centre or at least in the midst of many dissensions and divisions in my many years of ministry. Some of those divisions I've been pastoral in, like Paul, some I've possibly fuelled instead of quenching and have failed to reach any conclusion that satisfies the various parties. In a sense, these are real situations, with real people and aspects of the accounts still can touch us today. So let us reflect on these readings.

Matthew 4: 12-23

It is indicated by the words 'from that time on' or 'from that time Jesus began to proclaim..' in Matthew 4:17a, is the beginning of Jesus' preaching. He was living by the Sea of Galilee in Capernaum, so we are told and it is inferred he was here avoiding contact with the authorities after the execution of John the Baptist. It is also here that he begins to acquire a group of disciples, companions on the journey of faith. Here the core of disciples, initially are fishermen. Walking by the Sea of Galilee, Jesus told Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew along with the sons of Zebedee, James and John to "Come, follow me". It is interesting to note the difference to John's Gospel's version from last Sunday's reading. Andrew in that goes and gets his brother and introduces him to Jesus. Simply one of the many differences in the Gospels that occur. The amazing thing here is that they all immediately left their nets, their boats, their father, and followed Jesus. The Scriptures do not give us any indication about their thought processes or their emotional state at hearing the call of the Lord. The Scriptures just say they obeyed Jesus' call. Certainly the fishermen weren't the highest of earners in Jesus' day (unlike some tuna or cray fishermen today who earn millions) but nor were they poor. They had a reasonable income stream from their fishing and at worst could eat some of their catch and survive or barter for other foodstuffs. Hence this was a huge thing to do – a radical change of direction to follow Jesus. They could go back to fishing, which they did when Jesus was crucified but for them this was the beginnings of a faith journey. Certainly for me it has been a faith journey that has taken me around the world and taken my family to many parts of Australia! Going places we never expected to go.

A danger for the church today is the tendency for us to define our mission and then ask Jesus to tag along with us. Christian discipleship does not begin with us calling Jesus to participate with us but the reverse. Discipleship has to do with Jesus' call on our lives and our response to that. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said in his book 'The cost of Discipleship': "Discipleship is not an offer (humans) make to Christ. It is only (God's) call which creates the situation."

So often we want to control the situation, make decisions ourselves, instead of allowing God, through Christ, to speak into that place or space.

The fact that these first four disciples in Matthew's account left behind nets, boats and fathers is a sign that discipleship is not cheap. God's call on our lives is not always

convenient to us, in fact it can be most inconvenient and unsettle ourselves, family and friends along with careers and material possessions. Such is the call to “Come, follow me ‘Jesus’.”

This leads into the second reading from the beginning of 1 Corinthians.

1 Corinthians 1:10-18

Paul, in pastorally caring for the emerging early church fellowship groups that he and others established, had problems with leadership and who followed who.

Paul reminds them that we are called by Christ, we are followers of Christ and we are baptized into Christ’s body, the church.

Jesus is the one central to our faith is what Paul reminds those early ‘fish people’. The sign of the fish, ‘ichthys’ from the Greek, was a symbol of the early church which in a rough format could be drawn with your toe in the dust as you talked with people to show that you were part of Jesus’ call to be ‘fishers of men’. Here is the unity that Paul calls for: “...by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ ..may you all be in agreement and ...there be no divisions among you,....” (vs 10). It doesn’t mean that you all think the same, that you all have the same opinions on everything but rather that you can find unity in and through Christ. This has been a sticking point throughout the history of the church – people /institutions put their viewpoint first, ahead of Christ and ahead of the mission to which we are all called to through Christ.

Sometimes I can be ‘pigheaded’, so to speak, but then I need to be reminded, ‘Is this what Christ would do?’ or ‘Is this what Christ would want?’ or ‘Is this what will further the kingdom of God?’ and then, just maybe, I need to take a back step or a second look at what is happening.

Here we have the challenge for God’s church today, for the Uniting Church as a whole and for Wesley Uniting and our Parish to think about. Are we being faithful to Christ’s call to: “Come, follow me and I will make you fishers of men”.

I love how this section ends: “For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing’ but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” (vs 18)

Explaining our faith is not always easy to those who have no understanding of our faith experience(s). Paul acknowledges that, but implies that we don’t always help ourselves when we have divisions and dissensions that cause others who may be seeking to follow Jesus, then doubt the faith because of the dis-harmony they see within the church or congregation. Hence let us take to heart the Scriptures for today.

Conclusion

Two passages yet joined by Christ.

Two challenges:

1. Costly discipleship in a country where our faith is free and we can choose to do what we like with it. Yet we are reminded that we don’t fit Christ into our faith but Christ calls us to follow him and the implications of that for us. We need to consider that carefully and not simply see our faith as a ‘tag along’ to life but a call from God through Christ. This turns the tables and puts Christ central and not ourselves. Think about that!
2. Secondly, we need to be reminded to seek a unity based on Christ, even if we have differing opinions with others, and not to divide the ‘body of Christ’. We are witnesses to Christ and to his body, the church, and so to the wider non-Christian community we need to show that we are united in Christ.

Praise be to God for the Word for today. Amen!