

The Second Sunday after Epiphany
Year A - 19/1/2020

Isaiah 49:1-7
Psalm 40:1-14
1 Corinthians 1:1-9
John 1:29-42

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

Jonathan Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi of the UK, was once being interviewed on radio, and the question was asked about where his vocation began for him. He described how as an undergraduate studying philosophy at Cambridge, he came to a point of crisis and questioning in his faith. So he took himself off to the USA looking for answers, and was sent to see a famous rabbi in Brooklyn....

At this point the interviewer was positively salivating, thinking some juicy story was about to unfold... "So what wisdom did he impart?" she asked. "Well none really. He challenged me. He said, 'What are you doing for Jewish life in your university?' I said, 'Well I never thought of myself as a leader.' 'Why not?' he said. And we had this extraordinary situation... with one of the most famous and sought-after Jewish leaders in the world, talking to an anonymous student from 3,000 miles away, challenging him to be a leader. I thought that was pretty impressive."

Now, Rabbi Sacks himself is a world famous Jewish leader... and his vocation came from that simple challenge. 'What are you doing for Jewish life...? Why not?'

In today's gospel, Jesus, the new rabbi from Nazareth, challenges a group of ordinary working men... 'Have you ever thought that God may have something different in mind for you than fishing? You see the misery and oppression of your people. What are you doing to offer them hope? Come and join me... and we'll catch our people up in God's new vision of life!'

It's a simple story... Jesus is building a revolutionary movement, and he's calling people to get on board and do some heavy-lifting.

Our temptation as church is to read this gospel with a self-referential focus... to preach this text as an exhortation for people to get out there and start 'catching' more Christians... more Anglicans... more parishioners for St Andrew's. But that's far too narrow a reading. Jesus doesn't have any of that in mind when he calls the fishermen. He has a much bigger agenda... described in this gospel as "the proclamation of the Kingdom" (17,23) and "the dawning of light." (16)

He's calling together a movement to bring hope to a desperate situation. Galilee shared the general oppression of Roman rule, with some local twists that made it even more miserable for ordinary people. It's not just florid prose - they are people suffering under the pall of deep darkness. (16) It's into this misery that the gospel of Jesus comes as a counter-narrative... a shining light of a different way. This is how to understand the Kingdom of God that Jesus proclaims - not a heaven you access after death, but an alternative vision humanity can live here and now in God's presence. The Kingdom of Heaven is a direct challenge and alternative to the Empire of Rome - they are opposing social, economic and religious orders.

So this is the work Jesus is calling the fishermen, including our own patron Saint Andrew to - leadership in renewal for the people of Galilee and Israel beyond. They are called to be beacons of light and hope in a society drowning in despair. 'Enough of the fishing... now it's time to do some heavy lifting for the people and for God. Let's catch our people up into the vision of God's Kingdom.'

So we need to be careful about how we preach this gospel today... for it comes not to bolster our self-focus, but to challenge it.

If we would like to see more members for this church because it would make our budgets easier to manage; make our church on Sundays feel more full; increase attendance at our programs; enable us to finish the bell-tower - simply if we want to be a bigger church in order to maintain things the way we like it - then there is no support for this agenda from today's gospel. Jesus is just not interested. God is not interested.

We can only equate the call to discipleship with church membership, if the Church is living as an authentic sign of the Kingdom of God... that is, if the Church is a community that stands for a genuinely alternative way of living and relating, inspired by the vision of God. Are we that sort of church? Is that where our energy and activity are being directed? Amidst the increasing self-obsession and consumer greed of Australian society, does the Anglican Church stand out as offering a radically different way?

Many observers unkindly accuse us of only being interested in our own survival... and if that is true, then there is no connection between today's gospel and our church agenda. There's a simple test of how we're travelling... When people in our geographical community look at us, do they see us as a 'shining light in the midst of darkness'?

Jesus is not calling the disciples to be members of a new club. He's calling them to lead a movement of renewal, change and hope. He's calling them to join a God-inspired movement of alternative living. He expects them to become beacons of light.

And that call is exactly the same today... only the context is different. Jesus looks at us and says 'You see the darkness growing in Australia; you see the madness that is all too quickly establishing itself as unchallenged normality. What are you doing to offer leadership and hope? What heavy-lifting are you prepared to do in the movement of God's alternative way?' I don't pretend that this is a polite or comfortable question... nevertheless it is asked of all of us without exception.

For most of us it will seem incredibly challenging. How do we, in the place we are, become light-bearers of God's alternative way? Those of us who are parents or grandparents - how do we offer children a genuine alternative to consumerist greed; how do we model something different? Those of us working or holding community roles - with so many of our workplaces and professions under threat from self-serving values - how do we stand for, work for, something different.

This is the challenge of discipleship - not what do you 'believe' in terms of church dogma; not how many times do you attend church activities... but what are you doing... how are you living? It's the challenge to us a parish. Do we shine as a beacon of alternative living? And if not, are we going to do something about it?

Take some time this week... sit quietly and ask...

'Where in your life is God asking you to be a light in darkness?'

'And what do you need to do to respond?'

Of course, I have a vested interest as a Rector trying to plug the leaks in the crumbling dyke of the institutional church... of course I'd love your answer to include this parish in some way... But faithfulness compels me to be honest. This challenge of Jesus is not about institutional survival. It's about you and God and the world... It's about the revolution in human thinking and living inspired by Jesus, and our participation in this movement of light and hope.

It's God looking at us saying, 'Is this really what you're called to do and be? You see the darkness that so many people live in. What are you doing to offer light and hope?'

In the name of God. Amen.