

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, January 22, 2023

The Third Sunday After the Epiphany in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

Festal Eucharist

11 a.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Alison Turner, *Associate for Children and Family Ministries and School Chaplain*

on

Matthew 4:12-23

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They straightway left their nets, and followed him.

I'm sure that we all have certain sights, smells, sounds or tastes that readily evoke wide ranging memories of times and places, of people in our lives. A sensory treasure trove which is easily opened, unbeknown to anyone else in the room or space, as for a fleeting moment we are transported back in time.

The sound of waves, the distinctive smell of seaweed washed up on the shore, and the crunch underfoot of multiple crushed cockle shells, and the piercing screech of seagulls, in search of the seas harvest, readily take me back to my childhood and the seaside near where we lived.

My father and I frequently took Sunday walks after church, parking in the same spot beside the Cockle Sheds, in Leigh-on-sea. It was quiet there in winter, except for the trains to London that would occasionally whiz by, and the chatter of families buying ice creams even out of season. This was all in contrast to the sound of the summer crowds with their picnics, buckets and spades, and gatherings in outside cafes and pubs selling the 'Catch of the day', and at the close of day we would be treated to the sight of a beautiful sunset across the estuary. It was on these afternoon walks that the tide would often be far out and the mix of sand, shells and seashore debris would be washed up alongside the multiple boats, buckets and hefty, sometimes broken, nets which always appeared abandoned by midafternoon. Both they and the fishermen, and women's, work for the day, some of them parishioners, had long been completed, even while we were still tucked up in bed at home in the early hours of the morning.

Unlike my own fair-weather love for the sea, simply for leisure, fishers work continues to be bound by time and tides, with no option to cancel or change one's plan. Rather theirs is a profession that upholds resilience, determination, endurance, teamwork and a vast skill set. From what I gather fishers too are blessed with a gift of trust, as well as instinct, as to where to cast one's net, and they nurture an internal barometer which denotes whether there's a storm brewing. Just as we heard from our crew on the parish pilgrimage to Lake Galilee this past spring, as quiet waves slapped on the side of a boat, we were told that in that region a storm could would break the stillness, our sabbath rest, our calm, at any moment.

For many years I have been perplexed by the fishermen, those first disciples in today's Gospel story, with their apparently instantaneous, 'straightway', simplistic, and perhaps thoughtless willingness to follow Jesus. However, this type of following bears greater significance than at first glance, for in its original Greek form the verb to follow *akolouthēō*, encompasses broader themes of accompanying and assisting. Interestingly enough, just as the term acolyte, also derived from this word, isn't someone that simply follows the cross in procession, but bears the light and love of Christ that others are beckoned to follow. In other words, the call

to follow in today's gospel reading is not a singular but participatory endeavor in a way that we could never imagine, for it engages all of us, all our senses, body, heart and mind, not in isolation but together.

Early on in my faith I also upheld a misconception of the disciples having somewhat of a *before* and *after* life, one in which their giving up of their work at sea, demeaned the very profession, in which they had been immersed in since childhood and committed their life to.

However, as I have grown older, I see the call of the disciples in Matthew's Gospel is not as straightforward as that. The call of these fishermen is not simply about *giving up* all that has been, but an invitation to *give to* God their future who they will be and will do, as well as offer all that they have been all their relationships, their skills and all that they are the good, the bad and the ugly. In this pivotal moment in their lives Jesus stops them in their tracks, and their seemingly ordinary existence is poised to become extraordinary, as they lay down their nets for him, in order to follow him.

And in doing so Jesus doesn't end but nurtures and transforms their life. He commits to continuing to use and develop their specific, and perhaps transferable fishing skills: their attention to detail and the team sacrificial hard work, their skill in knowing where and when to fish, how to listen to the sight and sounds of the tides, to participate in gathering not fish but people, together.

The disciples immediate and faithful response to Jesus makes their decision to follow look so easy. Unfortunately, we are not furnished with any hint of caution, angst or concern, or a list of questions or conditions that they might have for this new call. Were they being naïve? Irresponsible in their immediacy? A venture which does not seem to engage a period of discernment of body, mind and spirit, or even psychological assessments associated with the church's approach to vocation today.

Such wariness around this type of radical calling often surrounds our images of those called to religious life, of lives offered to God with vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Lives which are often mimicked in film, dismissed in conversation or misunderstood even in the church, and yet, when such faithfulness is witnessed, something beautiful can happen. When we encounter a Sister or Brother's abandonment to Christ, or witness the inhabitation of a new vowed life, we see one immersed in the rhythm of community, service and prayer; a prayer which frames each and every breath and every part of the day.

Those disciples of Jesus of the past and in our time, who have laid down their nets for Jesus, whatever their pattern of daily living, in turn prompt us to choose Jesus and being open to lay down our own nets, the very symbols of our work, identity, power, assumptions, habits or possessions God may be asking us to set aside or lay down. Just as the disciples lay down their nets, their hands became empty to receive the gift God had in store for each one of them. What might happen if we did the same?

This weekend in addition to offering prayers for Christian Unity, and in line with a resolution by General Convention in 2022, many parishes are reflecting on the call to the Religious Life as a radical witness, and source of encouragement for all of us, in our own daily response to Jesus' call.

It was a Roman Catholic Franciscan Sister who helped me discover in my early days of parenthood, that all of life can be prayer, and in reflecting on the mystical life of Therese of Lisieux's *Story of a Soul*, that following Jesus too happens in the little ways that God shows his love to us, and asks us to do the same.

For in the business of our day, in the necessary chores, in the rhythm of story time, bath time, meal times, and on mundane journeys on the subway, these repeated ordinary moments are not interruptions but opportunities when we might offer our prayer to God. God speaks to us in our ordinary places just as he did by the shore to those fishermen, and uses the opportunities of the everyday life, that we might not only follow but also accompany and assist him in responding to his call. A call to follow Jesus which isn't just for the few, but a personal invitation or summons to us all:

I end with words of hymn titled *The Summons* by John Bell of the Iona Community, an international, ecumenical community of lay and religious men and women, working for justice and renewal in Scotland:

*Will you come and follow me if I but call your name?
Will you go where you don't know and never be the same?
Will you let my love be shown? Will you let my name be known,
will you let my life be grown in you and you in me?*

*Will you love the "you" you hide if I but call your name?
Will you quell the fear inside and never be the same?
Will you use the faith you've found to reshape the world around,
through my sight and touch and sound in you and you in me?*