

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst

West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Third Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year A)
22nd January 2023

Jesus is walking beside the Sea of Galilee, alone. This is one of the last times he will be alone. Although from time to time he will go away by himself to a lonely place and enjoy some solitude, for the rest of his life he will be part of a group, part of a community. As he walks beside the Sea he sees some fishermen, and he calls out to some of them. Does he call all the fishermen beside the Sea? Certainly not. We know this for sure, because Zebedee, the father of James and John is there, mending his nets with his sons, and he isn't called. Apart from him, there will certainly have been other fishermen there, and like Zebedee they are not called – just these two groups of brothers. Why them, and not the others? Jesus must have seen something in them that he did not see in the others, what might that have been?

There is a clue to the answer, I think some chapters later, when Jesus and his disciples are on that same Sea, in a boat. Jesus is sleeping when a storm breaks, and the boat is being tossed about on the water like a toy. The disciples panic and wake Jesus, who stills the storm, not just to something a bit more bearable, a bit less worrying, but right down to 'a great calm'. The disciples respond by saying "What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey him?" (Mt 8.27). Who is this man? The people who are gathered close around Jesus have a deep curiosity about who he is, what he is, what he might achieve, and who he might become for them. What might he mean for the way they live? What will he enable them to do, what will he challenge them to become?

So, in answer to the question, why did Jesus choose these four, and none of the other fishermen beside the Sea that day, I think the answer is that he perceived in them a real, lively, open curiosity. He saw that here were some people who might one day ask 'What sort of man is this?'

It is worth looking carefully at what he says to the four brothers. He says 'Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men'. The memorable part, for us, is the unusual bit, the fishers of men phrase, but this is only secondary. This will be the future result, they will become fishers of men (providing they are, in fact, the sort of people who will one day ask 'What sort of man is this?'). For now, though, being fishers of men lies way in the future. For the present, all they need to do is to follow him. He has seen in them a natural openness and curiosity, and these he can work with. So he invites them to walk with him, to listen to him, to watch him. He invites them to be disciples – that is, followers who are shaped and formed by what they see in the master. He will reveal to them what a human life is meant to look like. They will learn what a human being could become. This is not, first of all an invitation to believe in some specific doctrine, or to take on some particular spiritual devotion, or some new religious practice. All those will follow in due course, but the starting point is very simple. They are invited to spend time with Jesus Christ.

When he insists that people repent, it is not simply a question of adopting a different way of living, or returning to some forgotten moral norms: he is saying to them 'there is, present among you, one who can transform, enrich and renew your lives'. The response that he wants from them is, once again 'What sort of man might this be?'

It is important for us to understand, and this story shows it very clearly, that the call that Jesus issues is, first and foremost, a call to come close to him, to spend time in his presence, to develop that open-minded curiosity that asks 'What sort of man can this be, what might he do with my life?' When people look into the Church from outside, they often define us as people who do this, or do that; people who don't do this, but do something else; people who believe in this, and don't believe in that. In a sense that is understandable, because there are beliefs and practices that we take up as Catholics, but the fundamental description of what it means to be a Catholic is to say that we are people who have chosen to follow Jesus Christ, to live close to him every day of our lives, and always to be curious about what manner of man this might be, always curious about what he might be able to make of us, how he might enable our lives to be fruitful. When Jesus looked at the crowd of fishermen by the Sea of Galilee, he wasn't looking out for people with great intellects (important as such people are), or people with great faith: he was looking for people with a talent for friendship and a real curiosity about what their lives might become.

If we want to be fruitful followers of Christ – that is to say, if we want to live life to the full and to be truly alive, able to enrich and transform the world, then we need to be open and curious. What manner of person might Jesus Christ turn out to be? How might he enrich and transform my life? If I spend some time with him, if I observe what he does and listen to what he says, if I bask in his divine presence at Holy Mass, what might that open up for my future? What might I dare to do because I know I am loved and cherished by him, that otherwise would have seemed too much for me? Where might it all lead? Where indeed.