

Third Sunday before Advent

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker, at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey on Sunday 7 November 2021

Readings: Hebrews 9 vv 24-end and Mark 1 vv 14-20

Four of the worst words in the English language are 'rail replacement bus service'. This is the English equivalent of the States of Guernsey's enthusiasm for closing so many roads in a particular area of the island that it's very challenging to find a route to one's destination.

This last week, I spent three days in England, for a meeting in London on Wednesday, followed by a trip to Staffordshire for an overnight meeting. To my relief, I had no problems with the travel arrangements. The flights, into Gatwick and back to Guernsey from Birmingham, were on time, and the rail travel was equally good. I even managed to notch up a new London terminus and operating company, travelling to Birmingham on a Chiltern Railways service from Marylebone to Birmingham Snow Hill.

No disruptions. All according to plan.

This was not the experience of Simon, Andrew, James, and John, whom we meet once more in today's gospel. Theirs is a story of disruption.

As we have spent much of the last year, since Advent Sunday 2020, with St Mark's gospel, it is a surprise to return to the first chapter of the gospel and the call of the disciples. We hear about four people called to follow God. Simon, Andrew, James, and John do not hesitate when Jesus invites them. Both pairs of brothers, first Simon and Andrew and then James and John, follow Jesus 'immediately'. That word is used twice. We are left in no doubt. At the same time, it is easy to ignore the huge impact this had on Zebedee, the father of James and John, whom they left in the boat with the hired men. This is indeed a story of disruption to what was normal, to what was expected, and to what had been planned, no doubt, for the succession of the family fishing business.

The focus is on Simon, Andrew, James, and John, who were setting off on a life-changing adventure, which was to end with their martyrdom. But that is looking a long way into the future.

These short weeks between All Saints Sunday and Advent have become known as the 'kingdom season'. The gospel reading today begins with a strong reminder about the importance of repentance as a condition for entering the kingdom:

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'

The New Testament reading today continues the exploration of the letter to the Hebrews. The author has argued powerfully for the superiority of the new covenant, inaugurated by Jesus, over against the old covenant, which can be traced back to Moses' encounters with God on Mount Sinai during the long journey of the people of Israel from their slavery in Egypt to their freedom in the promised land. Before Jesus, there was a complete failure to remove the barrier of sin and the consequences of human sin and failure, which we find, in one way or another, on almost every page of the Old Testament. At the heart of the letter to the Hebrews is the message that the death and resurrection of Jesus has done away with the entire system of sacrifice and the temple cult. Unlike the high priests of old, Jesus 'did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands ... but he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.'

There is no longer repetition: 'as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself'.

And Jesus 'will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.'

The promise of the kingdom of God for those who follow Jesus is unambiguous, but cannot be separated from the need for repentance – recognising the reality of sin and resolving to turn away from it. Recognising the reality, the proximity, of the kingdom throws us on our knees – in acknowledgement of our sin and embracing the promise of forgiveness, not because we deserve it but because God loves us. We get caught up in God's saving work.

That's what happened to Simon, Andrew, James and John. They heard Jesus saying, 'Follow me.' Little did they know it at the time, but this was the call to participate with God in God's own saving work. It's the work of change and growth. That work is always about moving to a larger vision, orienting our life in a new direction, and experiencing that our little story of life is connected to and a part of a much larger story of life, God's life, his kingdom, which is both present and future.

Jesus does not offer a map, an itinerary, or a destination, only an invitation. This is not the type of journey you can prepare for. This is the inner journey, a journey into the deepest part of our being, the place where God resides. It's not about planning and organizing, making lists, or packing supplies. It's not that easy. If anything this journey is about leaving things behind. Listen to what Mark says:

- 'Immediately they left their nets and followed him.'
- 'They left their father Zebedee in the boat ... and followed him.'

The invitation, 'follow me,' is also the invitation to leave behind everything that gets in the way of us being the people whom Jesus calls.

That's the hard part for most of us. We're pretty good at accumulating but not so good at letting go. More often than not our spiritual growth involves some kind of letting go. We never get anywhere new as long as we're unwilling to leave where we are. We accept Jesus' invitation to follow, not by packing up, but by letting go.

'Follow me' is both the invitation to new life, and the promise of new life.

This about the freedom to be fully human and in so being discover the presence of God within us through the Holy Spirit. We let go so that our life may be reoriented, so that we can now travel in new direction, so that we may be open to receive the life of God anew. When we let go, everything is transformed. That's why Jesus could tell Simon and Andrew that they would still be fishermen. But now they would fish for people. They wouldn't become something they weren't already, but they would be changed. They would become transformed fishermen. They would more authentically be who they already were.

Ultimately, the call to follow Jesus is about letting go of our own life so that we can receive God's life and glimpse the possibility of his kingdom. This letting go happens in the context of our everyday activities as we try to do the right thing. These are the times and places Jesus shows up and calls into a new way of being and our world changes. It happened for Simon, Andrew, James, and John. It can happen for you and me.