

Follow Jesus anew

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Epiphany + 3A – Matt 4 12-25

Children: The baby possum and Mum reunited – I don't know how many of you got to read Barbara's email last Friday week, but please do. Barbara told a story of a ringtail possum joey that she and her cat Wolfie rescued. The tiny possum must have fallen off its Mother's back.

Barbara wrote that the baby possum made a hissing clicking sound, which is its distress call. Possum rescue people came to help Barbara get this joey reunited with its Mum, and they made a recording of its distress call. 'Then, after dusk, with the joey tucked up in a pouch, they walked around playing the recording and looking for a possum to show some interest. If a possum does respond, they place the baby in a box attached to a very long pole and hold it up as near as possible to the adult possum to see if it will come down for the baby.' They were out for four nights looking for the mother, but 'after several false alarms they found her on a neighbour's property and mama and joey (or Joanne, in this case) were reunited.'

People have distress calls too; we'll hear one from today's Psalm. The writer was surrounded by enemies and cried out, *'O Lord, hear my voice when I cry: have mercy upon me and answer me.* I'm sure God heard that distress call: and did something about it.

I want you to remember two things. First, we all have different voices, and we believe that God recognises each one – yours and mine and everyone's. And second, if anyone's too sad or sick to cry out, God wants us to cry out for them – help them cry out and find help – like Barbara and her friends did for that little possum. God will hear you when you cry out

for yourself, or for anyone else.

Sermon: I talked with the children about distress calls – like the one we read in the Psalm. It's really important that we hear distress calls and respond to them. In the Gospel, we heard another kind of call. Jesus found Simon and Andrew, then James and John and he *called* them, saying 'Follow me'. And they did, immediately. They left everything and took up their new calling – their vocation.

Jesus called those four fishers to follow him. And the example he gave them to follow was: 1, to preach the same message that landed John the Baptist in prison, '*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near*' – that was risky; 2 to teach in synagogues and proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom – that would mean trouble too; and 3 to cure every disease and every sickness among the people; not for the faint hearted. Simon and Andrew, James and John were called to follow Jesus, as he put it, as fishers. Their fishing changes from hunting fish to a search and rescue operation for people: to net people to safety from the trials and dangers of life.

There's a definite link between Jesus' call to follow him and the distress calls we thought about with the children. Jesus was building a team to work with him and respond to the distress of people trying to live up to a religious system where they were told they had to earn God's acceptance and love. And he and his disciples shared everyone's distress as they endured the corrupt, dangerous rule of Herod Antipas. And Jesus called his team to work like him responding compassionately to people who struggled with illnesses, disabilities and spiritual burdens. Jesus is a team player. He called Simon, Andrew, James, John, and he calls you and me to follow him and, like him, to get alongside people and face their burdens with them: as fishers, to net them into the safety of the Kingdom. Jesus' call – *follow me* – is his call to us as well. So how are we to respond?

At Christmas I said we study the Gospels and the stories of Jesus to learn to be like him – like Simon, Andrew, James and John did, to learn his passions and his motivations, his methods and his priorities: to learn from Jesus how to show everyone just how much God loves them and us.

It's always shocking how even a few days of illness can make us doubt God's love for us, never mind chronic debilitating conditions. The people Jesus cured didn't just get better and carry on. They experienced God's love for them. That meant they were healed in more ways than they imagined, not just cured of their presenting condition!

And that's a major part of the vocation we're called to. In a way, it's part of the justice focus of Jesus's ministry that people who are suffering should be relieved of it as soon as possible. But in our busyness, it's easy put compassion on the back-burner and to lose touch with Jesus as our foundation. Following him is a constant re-connecting process. Reading the Good News each week, like new Christians, we renew our passion and our understanding for this vocation – this thing Jesus calls us to do with our lives.

This re-focusing – re-newing – re-starting process is something we find Jesus modelling more than once in the Gospels. And today's Gospel records one of his new starts. It began this time with Jesus hearing of the imprisonment of John the Baptist by Herod Antipas (probably in nearby Sepphoris; Herod's temporary capital). Upon hearing this, Jesus withdrew from Nazareth to relaunch his mission down by Lake Galilee. His new start after that withdrawal signalled an explosion in new ministry; it's something of a pattern in this Gospel. Mt 12.15f, 14.13f, 15.21f

Two things in the past week have made me ponder this withdrawal – restart pattern. One was the weekly email from Bower Place, a well-known psychology teaching practice in Adelaide. They wrote about New Year's resolutions, saying it'd

be better if our resolutions weren't about taking on new things, but rather about dumping things that undermine us. One thing they advised was to put our phones out of reach for several hours a day so we could be present to people who are actually physically with us. – like the Gospel's withdrawal, re-start message.

The other thing that made me ponder this withdrawal – restart pattern is the stonework that's happening in the rectory right now. Peter, Zac and Kim are getting rid of the rising salt damp that's been fretting plaster away from walls in several rooms. The method they're using is called undersetting, and it's astonishing; I'll show you later if you'd like. Starting at floor level, the stonemasons remove the first six or eight courses of bricks and stone from the *bottom* of a wall, everything infected by the salt damp. Amazingly, the wall doesn't fall down, but stays suspended above the hole. Then they put down an impervious plastic barrier and lay new bricks on it to rebuild back up to the wall, hanging above. – also analogous to the Gospel's withdrawal, re-start message.

So, New Year's pruning resolutions and the act-of-faith shown in undermining a wall to repair it – they give me a helpful, more courageous perspective on today's Gospel, where we saw Jesus withdraw strategically from his vulnerable home-base only to explode out of the blocks from a new base with an invigorated mission.

We were recalled to that mission with him today – 1. Proclaiming repentance and the nearness of the Kingdom of Heaven, 2. Teaching in places where people gather and proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom, and 3. Curing ... all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics.

These three ministries take courage and energy to get on with; a freedom from inhibition and very clear priorities. And they need a regularly renewed, fresh, clear sense of who Jesus is –

the one who calls us to work with him, and shows us how to do it.

So does today's Gospel challenge any habits that disconnect us from Jesus and each other? Are we smothering our spirits under busyness or habits of uncompassion? Is there any salt damp rising to dissolve our ways of being disciples?

Jesus left behind a toxic environment in Nazareth and started again in a new home. He built a team of co-workers to join in his mission to turn people's lives around to the free Kingdom of Heaven, to proclaim the Good News of God's love and grace where people gathered for worship, and to bring healing to needy, suffering people. The messages I've heard from the psychologists and the stonemasons this week align with Jesus' decision to cut loose from old danger and decay, and freed from them, to follow him anew, turning other lives around to experience his love, his wisdom and his healing.

Have we received a new perception of Jesus today? Has the Gospel challenged anything in our assumptions about the way we follow him – even foundational assumptions? And if so, what do you think we might do with our old ways of thinking; our old ways of doing things?

Let's pray, and then observe a time of silence.

Inviting God, you call us to follow in many ways:

- *to witness with public deeds of justice;*
- *to the quiet work of companionship;*
- *to proclaim your truth from our hearts;*
- *and to sing your love.*

Invite us to follow you by respecting the many different ways of witness, and rejoicing that we have so many chances to answer your call. Amen.