

'Repent and believe the good news'

The Rev'd Dr. Susan F. Straub

Year B – Epiphany 3

Introduction

Today is the third Sunday of the season of Epiphany. Each Sunday, we hear from our scriptures how people recognised that God was present among them. How they came face to face with the living God and heard God speaking with them. These were personal spiritual experiences. In last Sunday's readings, the boy Samuel heard a voice that sounded like the priest, Eli, calling his name. When asked, however, Eli told Samuel that he hadn't called him.

That same experience was the beginning of my active faith: the voice calling my name in the night but husband and father saying 'No. I didn't call'. Later I recognised the voice in that of the parish priest who I hadn't yet met, Fr. Conrad Patterson.

The gospel reading this morning gave us the call of Simon, Andrew, James, and John by the very Son of God, Jesus of Nazareth. Their process of discernment and understanding took years. In Jesus, God was doing something new.

Mark 1:14-20

Simon, who Jesus would name Peter, his brother Andrew, and James and John heard God's call in Jesus. They left their old lives as fishermen and sons of fishermen to follow him and learn from him how to live in the freedom of God's Kingdom, and to do as he did. In Him, they saw another way of thinking that enabled freedom of the spirit while still living in the

reality of the Roman Empire. They had believed, for example, that everything in their lives was beholden to Caesar alone. The message was everywhere. Caesar was proclaimed 'Son of God' throughout the Empire and to serve him socially, politically, and economically was seen as a sacred duty. Living in the Kingdom of Caesar kept the empire not only ticking along but expanding.

The Melbourne journalist, Cheng Lei, released from three years' captivity in China on 11th October 2023 said this about freedom: 'There is freedom within and freedom without...the warders were more imprisoned because they were locked in what they could think, say, do, voluntarily, and for life. If you are not free of heart then physical freedom is wasted.' (Clarke, R., 2024, *Weekend Australian*, 20-21 January 2024, p. 2).

Those first of Jesus' disciples followed their fishermen fathers and believed that serving Caesar by providing the fish for the great fish-sauce beloved by the Romans, was their only option in life; that only news of another Roman victory at the edges of the empire, was the 'good news'; that this Kingdom of Caesar would never end.

See how the words Jesus used: 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news', in such a context, had such a powerful effect on Simon, Andrew, James, and John. They heard a call to freedom from the totalitarian grip of Caesar by following Jesus: a freedom of the spirit. Rabbis, teachers, had their disciples. He promised them that as his disciples, they would learn from him how to bring other people into the spiritual freedom of living in the Kingdom of God: "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." Real people. Ah! So still in this world of Caesar, of earthly Emperors, Kings, Queens, and Governors, or as today, communist, and other religious dictators, military regimes, or leaders of democracies.

We don't need to be anxious or fearful, which we tend to be at the thought of any kind of loss or change, when leaving familiar ways, however, comfortable, or uncomfortable we may have found them. Jesus said: "Those who are not against us are for us" and God is not against us. God is for us! We are free to enter at any time, in any place, the space, the silence, within us where God dwells. The door is always ready for opening. It helps us to seek a quiet place apart from the crowd, as Jesus did when he communed with God in prayer. Looking to the God of Jesus as the One whose will is to be served, transforms lives from the inside out.

1 Corinthians 7:29-31

Paul was one whose life was transformed, and he cared deeply for those in the churches. In his exhortation to the Corinthians, he seemed to have a strong sense of impending doom. I think Paul was seeing and feeling what was happening at that time in the Mediterranean. He saw the shifts that were occurring with the continuing decline of Greek culture, the ever-increasing ascendancy of the Roman Empire, and the conflicts, rebellions, and turmoil. All of which sounds a bit familiar to us as well.

We can see here his concern that the Christians in Corinth and their faith should survive this sort of social and political upheaval. The danger wasn't only from those in the region itself, but from those on the look-out for easy-pickings. The unrest was drawing the attention of looters, the barbarous hordes of the countries to the north, eager for raiding. The Corinthians were not going to survive if they didn't understand their freedom in Christ. Paul wanted them to understand the fullness of the grace they had received and so structure their lives as far as they could, to ensure that the good news, the *euvangelion*, could still be heard regardless of what was happening around them. The good news of the freedom of the spiritual Kingdom of God is like a pearl of great price, like treasure hidden in a field for it brings not just

survival but victory over adversity.

Paul was speaking from his own experience of that freedom and victory. He was brought before rulers, councils and governors, arrested, flogged. Yet, like his Lord and Saviour, he never cowered, never spoke, or acted like the victim. Not a victim of others, of disease, adverse circumstances, old age, his Jewishness. He was fortunate to be a Roman citizen and he experienced all aspects of his life fully, but he wasn't confined by identifying with any of them.

Conclusion

What happens when we start acting differently from what others may have expected from us? You know the saying; For every action there's a reaction. Some may grumble, withdraw, or even persecute or bully. Others may simply be perplexed, or maybe pleased or overjoyed. It doesn't really matter, but those of good will often respond by changing, too. This is the way the Kingdom works in the world, like leavening yeast in a lump of dough. In this way, this one Jewish man, Jesus, changed the world, was Son of God. How did he do it? By teaching a small group of men and women how to live in the freedom of the Kingdom. They changed on the inside and gradually learned to act in the way that Jesus acted towards other people. The fishermen Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John became fishers of people.

No-one was too high or too low, too respectable, or too disreputable, too wise, or too psychotic. They helped those in trouble: healing the sick, gathering the lost, accepting those who were different from them. Helped those who believed that they were bound by the circumstances of their lives: the wealthy with their property and weighty responsibilities, the poor doing what it took to survive, those living as incurables. God in Jesus shows us that when people live with the self-reflective awareness that comes from regularly communing with God in prayer and accepting his rule, his

Kingdom, they seek unblinkered and fearlessly for truth. They become fully alive to those around them, and in some way transform for the better their small part of the world. Living in the Kingdom of God is true freedom.