

**Sermon**

Sunday 24 January 2021

Lesson

St Mark 1: 14 – 20

This morning we heard the familiar text of the call of the disciples. After the arrest of John the Baptist, Jesus began His public ministry. He walked the shoreline of the sea of Galilee. Ahead of Him, two fisherman, Simon and Andrew, were casting their nets into the water. Jesus summoned them to His side. A little further on, another two fisherman, James and John, were mending their nets: again, Jesus invited them to follow Him.

These cryptically short verses encapsulate the calling of the first disciples. Do you remember your own story into faith, into membership of the church and, more profoundly, learning what it means to follow in the footsteps of Jesus of Nazareth? Jesus said, ‘Come, follow me’. On the face of it, the story from the Galilean lake doesn’t quite make sense: no one in their right mind would leave friends, family, home and security to follow someone they had never

met before. But, as always, we are to dig beneath the surface of Bible stories to find a deeper spiritual significance.

The word ‘follow’ may be rendered ‘chase’ or ‘pursue’: we are to pursue with energy and commitment. In the story, the disciples leave behind their past, begin life again, and, in faith, pursue Christ with everything they have. We are not called to abandon our responsibilities of family, friendship and work, but to spend a lifetime in spiritual learning – discipleship of Jesus.

What shape does discipleship take for you? The songwriter, John Bell, said:

When we get to heaven, Jesus might be interested in hearing us recite the record of our piety, but he might also be more interested in looking at our hands, to see whether, like his, they are worn and maybe even scarred through love and service.

The Trappist monk, the late Thomas Merton, was an inspiration to many people across world faiths. Described by the Dalai Lama as ‘a brother’, Merton led a wild existence before becoming a monk, peace

activist and civil rights campaigner. An orphan, Merton grew up with no religion. Unmarried, he fathered a child and spent much of his time drunk or womanising.

In time, Merton felt called to a new life. He found the peace and happiness he had craved all his life on his inner journey. Merton began to see God in all things. He said:

We are living in a world that is absolutely transparent and the Divine is shining through it all the time....Whether you understand it or not, God loves you, is present to you, lives in you, dwells in you, calls you, serves you, and offers you an understanding and light like nothing you've ever found.

The priest and palaeontologist, the late Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, saw the whole of creation aflame with the Light and Spirit of God: the entire cosmos was a burning bush – on fire with the Divine.

Teilhard de Chardin said:

Without earthquake, or thunderclap,  
the flame has lit up the whole world within.  
All things individually and collectively  
are penetrated and flooded by it,  
from the inmost core of the tiniest atom  
to the mighty sweep of the universal laws of being:

so naturally has it flooded every element, every energy, every connecting link in the unity of the cosmos, that one might suppose the cosmos to have burst spontaneously into flame.

A mystical vision, surely, but an overwhelming call to follow the Divine.

Some years ago, I listened to members of a Christian music group speak movingly of their own call to pursue a life led by Jesus. A drummer spoke of experiencing Jesus in his joyful, passionate playing of the drum; a guitarist said that playing his guitar at home and in worship made him lift his head and feel alive and filled with the Spirit; while a schoolboy said that worship songs in his earphones every morning on the way to school let him see that God is everywhere, all around, filling all things. *Where are your most sacred moments?* For different people, the road is different. What is common to all is a passion for Jesus, for the inner life, for feeding that sense of the numinous, and letting the Sacred flourish within us. It is a journey, an adventure, which takes a lifetime.

On my journey, the work of the Jesus scholar, the late Marcus Borg, has been formative. As he grew through his teenage years into adulthood, the God of his childhood no longer comforted him; in fact, the imagery of God ‘up there’, ‘out there’, the God of magic miracles and the finger-wagging God, became an obstacle to faith.

As time went on, the God ‘up there’, ‘out there’ was replaced by an increasing sense of God within, the Spirit at the very centre of all life. God became an inner awareness. The impersonal God, the judge, the God of law-breaking miracles, gave way to the God of love, the Divine lover, the One whose image we bear, whose Spirit breathes life into us. Borg spoke of the Transcendent within us.

Borg understood the Bible as a human product, albeit one through which generations have heard the voice of God, the *metaphorical* voice of God. Borg worked hard to challenge the literal interpretation of Scripture and believed that each successive generation had to find its own words, using its own concepts, its own understanding of reality, to express its experience of God and who

Jesus is. We are born into this conversation and it will continue after we die.

In our world today, Borg said that experience matters more than the doctrines of a previous era. The reason people speak of spirituality rather than religion is because they find fulfillment in encounter, not in yesterday's dogma. Borg said that words will always fail in expressing God. Spirituality is to do with relationship, intimacy, oneness and healing.

Marcus Borg came to feel that God is to be encountered in silence and in the meditative reading of Scripture. His call by Jesus drew him ever more deeply into the silent, mysterious nature of God and away from outdated theologies. He died five years ago this week. Asked about heaven and life after death, Borg quoted Martin Luther who said that 'We can know as little about life after death as a baby travelling down the birth canal can know about the world the baby is about to enter.' Borg said:

Is there an afterlife, and if so, what is it like? I don't have a clue. But I am confident that the One who has buoyed us up in life will also buoy us up through death. We die into God. What more that means, I do not know. But that is all I need to know.

Your sense of call may be strong, clear and overpowering. It may be subtle, silent, an intuition, a feeling. Whichever it is, continue on your journey.

Amen.