

3rd Sunday of the Epiphany (A)

Matthew 4:12-23

Ordinary people, ordinary (extraordinary) lives

Walking along the beach of Lake Galilee, Jesus saw two brothers: Simon (later called Peter) and Andrew. They were fishing, throwing their nets into the lake. It was their regular work. Jesus said to them, "Come with me. I'll make a new kind of fisherman out of you. I'll show you how to catch men and women instead of perch and bass." They didn't ask questions, but simply dropped their nets and followed.

A short distance down the beach they came upon another pair of brothers, James and John, Zebedee's sons. These two were sitting in a boat with their father, Zebedee, mending their fishnets. Jesus made the same offer to them, and they were just as quick to follow, abandoning boat and father (*The Message*).

Two sets of brothers leave everything to follow Jesus. Extraordinary – but what's it got to do with us? Many of us are retired, so getting up and leaving our work isn't an issue, and those in employment or working at home, have got responsibilities, and I suspect that if you suddenly walked off, it may not be appreciated. Though an immediate question it raises for me is about how we feel leaving the familiar.

These four leave their work, their homes, their families and friends, and surroundings in which they had grown up. It's a brave, even scary thing to do – leaving behind what we know and venturing out into the unknown. Even if it's in response to a call from God, it's still a daunting prospect. Check it out with yourself. How might you feel if faced with that scenario? Nervous? ... Nah – not going to be asked of me – but what if God did? What if God asked you to do something that took you out of your comfort zone – into the unknown? For some, this could be an exciting, welcome possibility. And I know people who have done that, even in later years. So, what do we do with this story? Jesus was telling people that God's kingdom had arrived. God was doing a new thing, and Jesus was inviting people to join him as he established this kingdom – to share in this new thing that God was up to. It's what we pray in the Lord's Prayer, 'your kingdom come...'

The Gospels show us more than one way of working for God's kingdom to come. The first disciples were called to leave their workplaces, their homes, and the places they had spent their whole lives, and travel around with Jesus – watching him, listening to him, learning how to fish for people. But Martha, Mary, and Lazarus were called to stay at home in Bethany, carrying on with their lives, offering hospitality to Jesus whenever he came to visit them. God calls people in different ways.

For sure, the calling of these four disciples is quite extraordinary – but let's take a reality check. Even when they started following Jesus, their days were full of ordinary stuff – trudging along dusty roads, going from village to village, through Samaria to Jerusalem and back again. Spending a lot of time with the same bunch of people. By the end of three years, they'd heard all each other's stories and jokes many times over. There were probably times they thought Jesus should speed things up, and times when they thought he was going too fast. There were probably times they wondered what they were doing and was this what they had signed up for. There were many days when the very ordinary was the norm, as it is for us.

A big part of our lives is routine – phone calls to make and emails to answer, meals to cook and lawns to mow, maybe fishing for some and work for others, visiting a friend, having a coffee, going off to work. You know how it is, and none of it feels particularly holy or dramatic. We don't drop

everything to start a new life very often. Some of us never do this at all. *But...* yes, there's a but... in every moment God offers us an opportunity to follow and to keep on following.

It all started when you were baptised. Back then a commitment was made that you would follow Christ your whole life long and would work with Jesus to bring in God's kingdom by proclaiming, by word and action, God's good news. And by the way, your baptism doesn't have a use-by date on it. Its active to the day you die. It's just that, as we get older, how we do this stuff changes... What I'm talking about is ministry. A Catechism in our Prayer Book puts it like this:

What is the ministry of lay persons?

From baptism, their vocation is to witness to Christ in the world using the gifts the Spirit gives them. Within the Church they share in the leadership of worship and in government.¹

What is the purpose of ministry?

It is to continue Jesus' servant ministry in the world by witnessing to God's reconciling love, to bring in the Kingdom of God, to build up the body of Christ, and to glorify God's holy name.²

We're being called anew every day to this. The point of the Gospel story is that God calls and uses *ordinary people*. Simon Peter and Andrew, James and John weren't scholars, they weren't 'religious professionals.' They were ordinary people making a living by catching fish. God calls people like us – who are busy about our work and our lives – being family members and neighbours, friends, and colleagues – God calls us to follow and get involved with the project of bringing God's kingdom ever closer.

We do this in the middle of our ordinary lives. God can be present in our conversations, in our trip to the supermarket. Sometimes God is there in an obvious way, like when we talk about the God-moments in our lives, but God is also there in the background, in the tone of voice we use, or the cups of coffee we make, or when we go out of our way to help someone. Maybe it's when we undertake some voluntary work, give a meal to a neighbour who is having a rough time. And as we do this, we can find what these four found, that the skills and talents they already had – in their case skills at catching fish – can be used by God for a larger purpose. Sometimes it means putting those skills to work in a new setting that leads us into unfamiliar territory, sometimes it means staying put, keeping on with the day job or the commitments we have in church life, and letting God use us in that. Never underestimate the way God can act through us as we go about our everyday life.

So here it is – Jesus called ordinary people right in the middle of their ordinary lives to do extraordinary things... and Jesus still does. I wonder, how is God using you? What is God calling you to do and to become this year?

*Alister Hendery
Hastings – 22.1.2023*

¹ *A Catechism*, page 93 of ANZPB-HKMoA. Question 35

² *A Catechism*, page 93 of ANZPB-HKMoA. Question 39