

An offer you can't refuse by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 6th February 2022 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: Isaiah 6:1-8, Luke 5:1-11 Year C, Proper 1

Introduction

How did you become a Christian, and when? Or perhaps it would be more meaningful to ask, when did God and Jesus Christ start to become real to you, more than just something you'd been taught about in RE or in Sunday School? Who here would say that God was real to them as a child or teenager? Who discovered God in your 20s or 30's? In your 40's or 50's? Later in life? We are all different, and the story of each of us is unique. The issue is what happens when we respond to God's call. That's what I want to talk about today.

Peter's Journey

The main character in today's Gospel reading, apart from Jesus, is Simon Peter, who, according to ancient tradition was the first Pope, that is the leader of the Church in Rome, the capital of the Empire. That is where he seems to be when he writes his first letter¹. But today we see him at the beginning of his journey of faith, a humble fisherman in Galilee.

Peter's journey was not an easy one. During the 2-3 years he was following Jesus around Galilee and Judea he went between moments of faith and enlightenment and getting

¹ 1 Peter 5:13 ("Babylon" is a code name for Rome.)

things very wrong. He drew his sword to defend Jesus, then ran away and later denied him. And yet Jesus did not give up on Peter.

His actual name, of course, was not Peter but Simon. Peter was the nickname Jesus gave him, meaning “the Rock”. What do we know about Simon’s background? He had a brother called Andrew, and they had a fishing business together. Simon was married – Mark tells us that Jesus healed his mother-in-law². St Paul later mentions in one of his letters that Peter was accompanied by his wife³. We don't know whether they had any children. We don't know much about his character from the Bible, except that he was impetuous and a little naïve, but fiercely loyal once he had become your friend.

Miracle on the lake

Picture the scene in today's gospel reading. It's been another routine night's work for Simon, Andrew, James and John. But not one of the best – they've caught no fish that night, and they're tired and discouraged. And then Jesus shows up with a crowd, borrows Simon's boat to teach the crowd – Simon, who'd been thinking of sorting out his nets and then getting home to breakfast and bed after a night's fishing, then finds himself asked to set out again into the lake to fish. I think it says something about the impact that Jesus had made on him that he was willing to do this – much against his better judgement. Perhaps we can explain this by referring to the story in the first chapter of John's Gospel about Simon being

² Mark 1:29-31

³ 1 Corinthians 9:5

introduced to Jesus by his brother Andrew, who had become a follower of John the Baptist. So Simon had already begun to realise that this carpenter from Nazareth was someone special.

But Simon was not ready for what happened next – suddenly the nets were full and beginning to pull the boat down. Quickly Simon calls to James and John, who are still with their boat on the shore, to ask them to come and help him. Both boats are soon so full of fish that they are about to sink.

Simon knew that there was no natural explanation for what had happened. They'd fished all night in this same part of the lake and caught nothing. The failure of skilled fishermen had suddenly been turned into success beyond anything they could have imagined. Simon had never been face-to-face with the power of God before. It was all too much to handle. He wasn't worthy of this kind of supernatural attention. If Jesus was this full of God's presence, he didn't want to be anywhere near a sinful person like Simon. “Go away from me”, Simon blurted out. “I'm too sinful for you”. “Don't be afraid”, replied Jesus. “I've got bigger fish for you to catch – people”. It was an invitation Simon couldn't refuse. From that day on, he was to be a member of Jesus' inner circle. If Jesus could make so big a difference in the work that Simon knew so well, surely he would enable Simon and his friends to succeed in the work that Jesus had planned for them.

Our Journey

This story is not just about the beginning of Simon's journey as a disciple of Jesus. It is also about the beginning of the journey of the Church. Some people say that Jesus never intended to found the church. So why, then, did Jesus choose these 4 fishermen? Later he was to add another 8 to the inner circle of disciples with whom he lived and travelled around, making 12 who were later named apostles – those who are sent. It was surely no coincidence that there were also 12 tribes of Israel. Jesus intended that these 12 would be the basis of a new community that would give a fresh start to God's people, Israel, and would later open its arms to people of all nations.

God never does one thing in isolation from his greater plan, and that is true in our own lives as much as in this story. As we study Luke's Gospel this year in most of our Gospel readings, don't just treat each story or piece of teaching as if it stands on its own. One of the great themes of Luke, both in his gospel and in his second book, *The Acts of the Apostles*, is that God has a plan for the world. The Jewish people had their part in it. John the Baptist, Mary and the apostles had their parts to play. Jesus supremely had the lead role, showing the reality of God's Kingdom in word and deed, and through his death and resurrection.

The task of the church is to continue God's plan – to bring the good news of God's kingdom to everyone in the world. Like the early church, we may feel that we are small, and that the odds are against us. But God is on our side – or perhaps, more importantly, if we are on God's side then we

can expect his amazing power to work through us, inadequate and weak as we are. Like Simon Peter in our Gospel reading, we as a church have a lesson to learn from the story of the miraculous catch of fish. The question God asks us is whether we, like Peter and his friends, are up for the challenge of following Jesus and letting him do his work through us.

Responding to the Call

Perhaps being part of God's mission to the world seems like far too big a task. I'm reminded of a moment in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. The people of Middle Earth face a massive power of evil and overwhelming military forces, but they do battle nonetheless. The dwarf Gimli utters a memorable quote: "Certainty of death, little chance of success – what are we waiting for?!" And of course, good eventually triumphs.

Our OT reading is about the call of the prophet Isaiah to proclaim his message. Isaiah, seeing the holiness of God, is struck by a sense of his own unworthiness.

And I said: 'Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!'⁴

A seraph cleanses him with a burning coal, and tells him that his sin has been blotted out. And then Isaiah hears the voice of the Lord:

'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I; send me!'⁵

⁴ Isaiah 6:5 NRSV

Similarly, Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians, speaks of how unworthy he was to be an apostle because he had persecuted the Church⁶. But God's call to us does not depend on our worthiness or our qualifications. God does not call the qualified, but qualifies the called.

Will you respond to God's call to you to follow Jesus this year in your journey of faith? And will you join with others in the mission that God has for St Michael's Church?

To finish, I'd like to read you an inspiring poem which speaks allegorically about what Jesus can do in our lives when we let him work in us.

"The Touch of the Master's Hand," by the American poet, Myra Welsh (1878-c.1950)

'Twas battered and scarred, and the auctioneer
Thought it scarcely worth his while
To waste much time on the old violin,
But he held it up with a smile.

"What am I bidden, good folks," he cried,
"Who'll start the bidding for me?
A dollar, a dollar, then, two! Only two?
Two dollars, and who'll make it three?"

"Three dollars, once; three dollars, twice;
Going for three . . ." But no,
From the room, far back, a grey-haired man
Came forward and picked up the bow;

⁵ Isaiah 6:8 NRSV

⁶ 1 Corinthians 15:9

Then, wiping the dust from the old violin,
And tightening the loose strings,
He played a melody pure and sweet
As a carolling angel sings.

The music ceased, and the auctioneer,
With a voice that was quiet and low,
Said: "What am I bid for the old violin?"
And he held it up with the bow.

"A thousand dollars, and who'll make it two?
Two thousand! And who'll make it three?
Three thousand, once; three thousand, twice;
And going and gone," said he.

The people cheered, but some of them cried,
"We do not quite understand
What changed its worth?" Swift came the reply:
"The touch of a master's hand."

And many a man with life out of tune,
And battered and scarred with sin,
Is auctioned cheap to the thoughtless crowd,
Much like the old violin.

A "mess of potage," a glass of wine;
A game, and he travels on.
He is "going" once, and "going" twice,
He's "going" and almost "gone."

But the Master comes and the foolish crowd
Never can quite understand
The worth of a soul and the change that's wrought
By the touch of the Master's hand.

Here I am, Lord

I could leave it there. But I'd like to tell you a little story about one of my favourite hymns, which we are going to sing later, which fits in with the passage from the prophet Isaiah. It's a hymn which I first heard in January 1991 at the funeral of my wife's uncle Tom, who was the Roman Catholic parish priest of Chislehurst. It's called *I, the Lord of sea and sky*, and the chorus goes like this;

Here I am, Lord. Is it I, Lord?
I have heard you calling in the night.
I will go, Lord, if you lead me,
I will hold your people in my heart.

At the time, I was doing a part-time course in preparation for full-time training for the ministry. The funeral was attended by an absolute multitude of Catholic priests. I was seated in the gallery at the back of the Church, and I had a good view of these priests processing in, two by two. They kept coming, until there were 120 priests in the church, in addition to the congregation. The service included that song, and there was I, feeling called by God to ministry in the church. You can imagine the impact that service, and in particular that song, had on me.

That's part of my story. But you don't have to be a priest to be following the mission call of God. Each of us is called to be part of God's mission to the world, and many of us have responded, not only to the call to follow Jesus in our own lives, but also to the call to serve God in the church or in the world in one or more ways. I think we all know that this church isn't run by just a few people, let alone one paid

parish priest. I am so grateful to the many people who live out their discipleship by acts of service in all kinds of ways. But we need to call new people to follow Jesus, and to become Christians, not just for their own sake but for the sake of the Kingdom of God. We're often inclined to think that we follow Christ for our own benefit, to know that we are loved by God, and of course that is important – without that personal relationship with God none of the rest of it makes much sense.

But God doesn't call us just for our own benefit. He calls us to be part of his mission, so that through us others can know his love and his power to transform their lives. It can be in simple ways – acts of kindness, a phone call to give someone support, a word to a neighbour, help given to someone in the street, in lots of informal ways as well as through formal roles. But as a church we do need people to fulfil particular roles. For several months we've listed some roles that need filling in our monthly newsletter. We haven't been inundated with offers. I realise that often a personal approach is needed. From time to time we noble people and ask them to consider taking up a particular responsibility.

I realise that many of you are already serving God in various ways within our church. But I wonder whether today God is calling some of you to offer to take up some role – it could be something simple like cleaning the church or joining the coffee rota. Let's ask God to show us what we can do to be part of this great mission that he calls us to carry out as a church. Let's pray also for others to hear his call, including

those who are on the fringe of our church, and those who are currently outside of our community, that they too would discover the joy of being disciples of Jesus and serving the purposes of God.

So, as I finish, let's take a moment of silence to consider what God is saying to us today, as individuals and as a church....

Prayer

Let us pray. I am going to read verses from Isaiah chapter 6 as a meditation. Isaiah, seeing the holiness of God, is struck by a sense of his own unworthiness. Cleansed and forgiven, he responds to God's call. You may wish to make Isaiah's words your own.

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I; send me.'