

Trevor McCracken Matthew 4:12-23
First Call
Sunday 22 January 2023, 8am &10am St Stephens

A certain Anglican couple felt it important to own an equally Anglican pet, so they went shopping. At the kennel specialising in this particular breed, they found a dog they liked quite a lot. When they asked the dog to fetch the Bible, he did it in a flash. When instructed to look up Psalm 23, the dog was equally fast, using his paws with dexterity. They were so impressed that they purchased the animal and took it home.

That night the Anglican couple had friends over. They were so proud of their new Anglican dog and his great skills that they wanted to show him off. They called the dog and gave him commands and the friends were impressed and asked whether the dog was able to do any of the usual dog tricks as well. This stopped the couple cold as they hadn't thought about 'normal' tricks.

"Well," they said, "Lets' try it out." Once more they called the dog and clearly pronounced 'heel'. As quick as a flash, the dog jumped up, put one paw on the man's forehead and the other paw raised up, closed his eyes in concentration, and bowed his head. They had been deceived; the dog was not Anglican but Pentecostal.

Anglicans may not often be deceived but we can be confused or mistaken as I once was many years ago about the Sea of Galilee. The Sea of Galilee is actually a lake, not a sea and is the lowest freshwater lake on earth, about 209 metres below sea level. It is the largest freshwater lake in Israel although it is much smaller in area than our Lake Taupo, at 166 km² while lake Taupo is 616 km² however all the same it is probably the most well-known lake in the Christian world. Today in Tiberias on the western shore of the Lake you will find one of the most remarkable archaeological finds anywhere in the Holy Land, the boat that might have belonged to Andrew and Peter, or perhaps

the Zebedee family. The boat was found sticking out of the mud one summer when the level of the Sea of Galilee dropped dramatically in a period of extraordinary dry weather. With great care, the boat was lifted clear of the sea bottom, cleaned, and preserved. Now, it is in a climate-controlled room of its own in the tourist centre that has become the focal point for lake rides on modern-day but period-looking boats. You do pay extra to see the remains of the boat and the room is one of the coolest Marion and I have been in while in Israel. The ancient boat has been carbon dated to exactly the period of Jesus' life giving us the sort of boat that Jesus' first followers used for fishing.

The boat is a vivid reminder of the day-to-day existence of his first followers – and of what it cost them to give it all up and follow Jesus. They were, in today's language, small businessmen working as families not for huge profits but to make enough to live on and have a little left over. Fish were plentiful and there were good markets. In a cosmopolitan area, with soldiers, wayfarers, pilgrims, and pedlars coming and going, as well as the local population, people would always want what they were selling. But it was hard work, and sometimes dangerous as the lake could get very rough with very strong winds as I noticed one day when I was in Israel. Their lives were moderately secure, but hardly luxurious.

So why did they give it all up to follow a wandering preacher? The same question faces people today. Why did someone give up a promising legal career to become a preacher, throwing away a lifetime of high earnings for the insecurity and financial stresses of pastoring and teaching a church. Nicky Gumbel, who rewrote the Alpha Course and led it for many years did exactly this, leaving his law career, for ordination in the church and become the curate and later the Vicar of Holy Trinity Brompton, in London, retiring just last year. Why did heart specialist and concert pianist Ray Windsor abandon his remarkable career in order to study theology and later lead a Bible College? Others, doctors and nurses, pilots become missionaries, giving up lucrative lifestyles and income, for the Kingdom of God. Why give up security for insecurity?

This is the question that many have had to face, and the answer for the millions of Christians who have walked this way and given up so much that the world would deem valuable, in order to live and promote honesty, integrity, faith, hope and love; is because of Jesus himself. Jesus and the astonishing magnetism of his presence and personality. This can be known and felt today, as we meditate on the Scriptures, particularly the gospels, and pray to know him better, just as the first disciples knew and felt his presence over 2000 years ago.

Jesus started by calling a few vocally in person, today he calls us also. Sometimes it comes slowly, starting like a faint murmur and growing until we can no longer ignore it. Sometimes he calls people as suddenly and dramatically as he called Peter, Andrew, James and John. When it happens to you, by whatever means and at whatever pace, you will know; Jesus has a way of getting through, and whatever we are engaged with - whatever nets we are mending, or fish we are catching - somehow, we will be sufficiently aware of his presence and call to know what it is we have been asked to do.

At least, we will know we're being asked to follow him. We won't necessarily know where it's all going to lead, and we wouldn't perhaps be quite so eager if we did. 'You'll be catching people now!' was what Jesus said to Peter and Andrew; what did they think that would mean? Did they know how the 'people' in question would feel about it? Did they have any inkling that both of them would end up crucified, as their master would be? Did James, the brother of John, have the slightest idea that within a few years he would be dead, killed on the orders of Herod?

No, they didn't. God in his mercy reveals things little by little. Nor did Peter think that he would end up with a huge church in Rome dedicated to his memory; or Andrew suppose that whole countries such as Scotland, Greece and Russia would regard him as their patron saint. They sought neither the glory nor the pain, that day when a young man walked by the lake in their little town of Capernaum, on the north shore of the Sea of

Galilee. They only saw him; and that was enough. In him, as Paul might have said, all the treasures of glory and pain are hidden. That is what the gospel story is about.

But it wasn't just personal magnetism that drew people from hundreds of kilometres around to seek out this Jesus as he went to and fro across the region of Galilee. It was his remarkable healings or signs as John puts it in his gospel. Matthew will tell us more stories about such events in due course. For the moment, in quick summary fashion, he tells us how word suddenly went out that people whose lives had been blighted by every kind of illness and disease could be healed if they came to this extraordinary man.

Historians today agree that this is the only explanation for the crowds that Jesus drew, at least initially. People in dire health want to be healed, be it body, mind or spirit, before they are open to hear the message. Jesus really did have remarkable powers of healing. But Jesus was never simply a healer pure and simple, vital though that was as part of his work. For him, the healings were signs of a new thing that God was doing through him. God's kingdom, God's sovereign, saving rule and reign, was at last being unleashed upon Israel and the world, through him. How could this not bring healing in its wake? Soon the fishermen found themselves, not placidly working at their family craft beside the lake, but at the centre of bustling crowds. Jesus' mission was well and truly launched, and they were caught up with it.

What pulls the crowds today? Entertainment, of course; rugby, one-day cricket and other top sports, rock music concerts, exhibitions, movies and shows, large concerts with firework displays. What would it take, what could, and should Jesus' followers be doing today, that would bring people in their droves to find out about Jesus? Have you heard Jesus calling you to do something for the Kingdom of God to make this happen?