

Sermon Ordinary 5 Year C 2019

The culture we live in is one which places a high value on novelty and change, on innovation and creativity and originality. Most of us, however, are actually deeply conservative. Most of us actually resist change. We often push hard against movements of change because they can be so disturbing and unsettling. Most of us, deep down, want a quiet, stable, ordered life. And change - or the threat of change - can create a certain level of anxiety. Indeed, in lists which outline the top causes of stress most are to do with change. The death of a loved one, moving house, shifting jobs, becoming married and experiencing divorce are all significant life moments and all bring change - often momentous change - and so often stress as well.

At the same time, we know we cannot stay where we are. We are evolving creatures. We might say we don't like change but I'm sure few of us would happily volunteer to move back to days when most of humanity lived in mud huts, when the average life expectancy was 40 years of age, when you could die of scratch on your arm, when 75 % of children were expected to die before the age of 5. I doubt many of us here would have preferred to stay in a world without cars, or washing machines, vacuum cleaners or gas ovens. With positive changes in medicine and technology we live longer and healthier. We enjoy a level of comfort and security and leisure never before enjoyed by human beings at any stage in our history. So, change, even if it is sometime challenging and difficult, also brings us many benefits. One of the challenges of human life, then, is to navigate the tension between good and helpful change on the one hand, and remaining grounded - anchored - on the other.

In large measures, Christian faith itself is a dynamic play of tensions. At its very heart, Christian faith holds so many seeming paradoxes together. Our faith is a faith which holds together various tensions. It's why the cross in part is such a powerful symbol of our faith: focusing and uniting the apparent tensions of the horizontal and vertical; heaven and earth; divine and human, life and death. As people of faith we also experience the tension between stability and change; between being anchored in faith and journeying in faith.

Various spiritual traditions say that if you cannot find God where you are you'll never find Him anywhere. At the same time, we speak of faith as a journey; that we are the pilgrim people of God; that we have no earthly homeland; that we are called to grow in faith that God is always calling us beyond ourselves to something more wonderful. There is in all this, then, a sense of dynamism and movement.

It is that direction - that side of the tension - we hear in the stories of Jesus calling his disciples, and what we encounter in the Gospel today. And in these stories, the call of Christ is to *leave* behind what is safe and familiar, and to *move* into the new life of being a disciple. As we hear at the very end of the gospel today Peter and James and John do *leave everything and follow him*. Indeed, the idea of *following* Jesus becomes a central way of understanding discipleship, a crucial category in understanding what it means to be a person of faith. And of course, *following* implies movement, action, a leaving behind something to go somewhere else.

The story told us today is (hopefully) one that is familiar to us. Peter here the central character. And the key detail around which hinges the move from Peter's old life as fisherman to new life as disciple is that of his obedience; of Jesus saying cast out your nets and Peter doing so. And this despite them having already packed up and doing the washing up. Despite he being the fisherman and Jesus not. Despite working hard all night with no result. But obedience bears fruit. And this for Peter as well. Or, in this instance more specifically, a great haul!

When the power of God is shown, it can startle us, shake us. Isaiah when face to face with the glory and holiness of God can only respond how wretched he is, how unclean his lips. For Peter too. Brought to his knees, *leave me Lord for I am a sinful man*. When we see, even a glimpse of God we recognise how Other he is, how other we are. To accept the life (and so the necessary change) Christ invites us to, we must be honest about who we are before the Living God. But it is from that *crucial place of humility* that Isaiah is sent, and that Jesus commissions Peter. When we recognise who we are before God we recognise that change is absolutely essential.

For Peter that change means leaving his boats behind. But the memorable catch-phrase of the new disciples becoming *fishers of men* reveals something of the way that Jesus calls us to change: it is always anchored in *who* we already are and *where* we already are. And in the mystery of the Gospel, something of the tension between stability and change is resolved! Jesus takes a language and an image, a way of thinking that is familiar to Peter and James and John. They understand fishing. This is their life. Jesus doesn't ask them to imagine that none of that matters. Jesus doesn't step into our life in a vacuum, as if all that has gone before counts for nothing. No. He *finds us where we are* and from *that* place leads us to God.

It shows the profound respect that Jesus has for us. We see in Peter's response that following Jesus *is* costly. It *does* mean leaving behind an old life. But while Christ calls us to change, to follow him, we come with our own uniqueness, our own stories, our own particular way of continuing the work of God. The Gospel never expects uniformity in our experience of faith. God respects and uses our uniqueness. the tension between stability and change, permanence and movement is resolved. Faith takes us somewhere else, while being anchored in the truth of who we are and the truth of who God is.

Now, in the life of the church we are often faced with the temptation to settle on one side of the tension between change and stability at the expense of the other. This we see play out over the abandoning of the faith and practice of the church for a so-called progressive agenda. But we also see it in unhelpful nostalgia or sentimentalism and to make idols of a past eras, or a mythical 'golden age.' But we are reminded that abundance comes through obedience and humility. Life and growth comes by being anchored in truth. The truth of who we are and the truth of who God is. I believe it will be important to accept this dynamic as core aspect of our life together. But as a parish community it can also be part of our gift to the wider church. We can be a vital, energised part of the church, but one anchored in the living faith of the apostles. Our future cannot be built on nostalgia or sentimentalism. Just as it cannot be based on novelty or confusing the spirit of God with the spirit of the age. But God has blessed us, gifted us with incredible riches - lost in so many other parts of the church. And anchored in these, we set our sights ahead. Amen.