



# *Third Sunday after Epiphany*

## *Sermon by Revd Matthew Wright*



22 January 2023

### READINGS

Isaiah 9:1-14; Psalm 27:1,4-12; 1 Corinthians 1:10-18; Matthew 4:12-23

## *Jesus calling his first disciples*

The Gospel readings assigned for these early Sundays of the year, reflect the beginnings of Jesus' Galilean ministry, and today we see, amongst other things, Jesus calling his first disciples. Before saying more about this, perhaps we could make a few remarks on some of the historical aspects of our Gospel reading.

We read in the opening verse that John the Baptist had by this time been arrested. Why, in the first place, was he arrested? There is an account, perhaps legendary, as to the reason for his execution, but we are never told the reason for his initial arrest. This would likely have not been dissimilar from the reason for Jesus' own eventual arrest. The authorities, both Jewish and Roman, were always wary of Messianic figures, especially if they were charismatic figures capable of stirring up the populace into a revolt by their preaching. Although theoretically religious figures, the authorities would have viewed both John and Jesus as seditious, and crucifixion, as we know, was a form of execution for those guilty of the crime of sedition.

So that brief detail about John's arrest is already ominous at this early stage. We then hear of Jesus' withdrawal to Galilee. Though historically we understand him to be originally from Galilee, he moves from Nazareth, his hometown, to Capernaum. And there is a quote from Isaiah which forms part of our OT reading for this week, referring to "Galilee of the Gentiles". Nathaniel's retort to Philip in the opening chapter of John's Gospel, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" is indicative of the prevailing stigma which people from the southern region of Judah had for those from the northern regions in Galilee. The northern kingdom had been conquered by the Assyrians in 722BC and it was understood, by those in the south, that they had been contaminated through their intermarriage of the invading Assyrians. Jesus himself must deal with this stigma as he makes his way further south.

Interestingly, in the call of the first disciples, we see a discrepancy in the accounts of Matthew and Luke. Matthew has Jesus call Simon and Andrew, and James and John separately. In addition, the detail around the fishing enterprises of both pairs differs and is indicative a variation in size or scale. Simon and Andrew are pictured using a circular cast net, typical of a subsistence done often from the shore. The smaller, circular cast net was ideal as it required no boat and could be operated by a single person.

James and John on the other hand, are pictured "in the boat... mending their nets" which meant they were using either the seine net or the trammel net, both of which required the use of at least one boat, but probably two. Mark's version (which often is the most historically reliable) also mentions that when James and John left their fishing to follow Jesus, they their father (who probably owned the business) as

well as the hired men as well (Mark 1:20). This indicates that the enterprise of James and John (and their father) was a larger, probably more commercial, one than what was likely the subsistence-like efforts of Simon and Andrew.

In Luke's version of the call of the first disciples we see a different picture. Simon-Peter is pictured as being in partnership with James and John and together owning at least two boats. Not only does Luke seem to conflate some of the details he has received from Matthew and Mark, he possibly has also incorporated an episode which we see in John's Gospel, the miraculous catch of fish. This is recorded only in John and Luke. In John, the incident occurs right at the end of his Gospel, after the resurrection, once Peter has returned to his previous occupation out of sheer despondency. There is perhaps no way of telling when the miracle took place in the ministry of Jesus, before or after the resurrection or, indeed, if it took place more than once.

Perhaps the take-away though for us, in seeking to apply the passage to our own lives, and this is not a new or original insight, is the radical nature of the calling of these disciples, indeed of that of all the disciples' calling of which we have record. If Simon-Peter was a subsistence fisherman, perhaps an argument can be made that it was easier for him to leave his profession and follow Jesus. James and John were in a different situation given that they, together with their father, owned a type of fishing business. Leaving this would have meant not only financial detriment to the business and family, but would have brought shame upon their father.

The call issued by Jesus, in the case of all of the disciples, involved a complete paradigm shift however where the disciples go from "fishing for fish" representing their everyday mundane activity, attendant with the same old worries, stresses and concerns, doing what is expected of them, to fishing for people, being fundamentally concerned with the affairs of God's kingdom. The change need not necessarily be one in occupation, but is certainly one in orientation, in conceptualisation and in motivation. Are our worldviews informed by the local fishing industry around the sea of Galilee, meaning the humdrum of our own local economy, our own parochial pursuits, or are they informed by the greater, more fundamental concerns of God's work in the world? As we begin this new year, may we all hear and answer faithfully, Jesus' call to leave our nets and follow him.

Amen