

JESUS' CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP

Matthew 4:12-23

The gospels are unlike any other literature. They do not offer a chronological life of Jesus as biographies would. They may best be described as theological history. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, each evangelist offers their particular perspective and insight into the life and teaching of Jesus. A case in point is Jesus' call of the first four disciples. Matthew's account appears almost as a bolt from the blue, whereas John informs us that at least Peter and Andrew and perhaps John, followed Jesus for several months, possibly even a year in Judea, prior to Jesus' ministry in Galilee.

Matthew tells us that 'when Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he withdrew to Galilee' (v12). Far from being an attempt to escape the influence of Herod Antipas who had imprisoned John, as some argue, it was to fulfil the prophecy of Isaiah in keeping with God's great plan of salvation (vv15,16). Moreover, Herod's capital Tiberias was only some ten kilometres from Capernaum, the centre of Jesus' ministry in Galilee.

Jesus' summons to the people echoed that of John the Baptist, 'Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near' (v17). Repentance is not merely a change of mind or feeling of regret. It is a complete change of direction, enabled by God's Word and empowered by the Holy Spirit. As Martin Luther put it, God's words are his acts. When Jesus says 'turn around', he releases with that word the power to do so, even to us who hear it today. The 'ability' in the word 'responsibility' is God's, the 'response' in the word is ours the hearer. Even in English grammar we speak of verbs as 'doing words'. God's word is not passive, it is active. Repentance is not a call to pull ourselves up by the bootstraps. It's a call to respond to the summons of grace.

Jesus is the light to the nations (v16). Where he goes, darkness flees. He is the great hope of the peoples of the world. We don't place our hopes in the nations themselves, or in their political, economic or social policies however well implemented, however hopeful. Just as the original disciples placed their hope and destinies in the hands of Jesus, we are called to do the same. We must hear in Jesus' call, a challenge for all of us to correct our lifelong ambitions in keeping with his will for our lives.

John Calvin reminds us that the call of the Twelve 'is not merely a general description of the call to faith, but a particular one for a certain task'. As the disciples were ultimately called to a role as apostles in the foundation of the church, they were personally required to leave their prior

profession. In so doing they did not act impulsively or irresponsibly. Peter provided for his mother-in-law with his home being the base of Jesus' ministry. James and John entrusted their fishing enterprise to their father. Not every disciple was called to leave behind his or her profession. Women of means supported Jesus and the Twelve, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus in retaining their positions in society were able to provide a decent burial for Jesus, unlike other crucified victims whose bodies were left hanging to the elements.

Likewise today, not everyone is called to so-called full time service as pastors or missionaries. But we are all called to discipleship. Jesus' word still changes and forms people. As one writer, has put it, 'it performs, re-forms, trans-forms and con-forms whatever and whoever it touches'. The power that makes disciples is not the human potential of a Peter and an Andrew, it is the spiritual power of the Word 'Follow me'. That Word and that power still calls and makes disciples today.

Alan Cameron
Trinity Presbyterian Church
Lynnwood
3rd Sunday after Epiphany
Sunday 22 January 2017