

Readings: Isaiah 9: 1-4

Title: Called to be . . . a Christian 4 Church at All Saints' Shepreth

Psalms 27, 1 Corinthians 1: 10-18

Matthew 4: 12-23

The Church of England clearly has lots of extremely clever people working for it in one capacity or another, and some of those people are responsible for writing the lectionary – that small book that I refer to every now and again which recommends readings for any given day of the year. And I say they are clever people because the job they do in linking lots of readings together is usually quite brilliant.

So, when I came to look at this morning's gospel reading I was more than a little surprised to find the same story included this week as we had last week – albeit told by a different writer. Last week we had John's account of the calling of the first disciples and this week we have Matthew's version. So what is it about Matthew's version of the story that warrants its inclusion? And how do the readings included in today's lectionary help us understand Matthew's story?

Our gospel reading starts with a bit of scene setting. We are right at the beginning of Jesus' ministry – he has been baptised by John the Baptist, he has been fasting in the wilderness for 40 days where he was tempted three times by Satan, and then hears of John's arrest. This seems to be the signal that his mission starts now and so he moves from the tiny hill village of Nazareth to Capernaum – a much larger town, maybe with a population then of around 10,000, on the banks of Lake, or as Matthew calls it, the Sea of Galilee. And Matthew, reaching out to his Jewish audience, links Capernaum to the beginning of Isaiah Chapter 9. "Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles."

Actually that last phrase is interesting. Right at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, which the Jewish people are expecting to be to them, we are told Jesus is going to fulfil Isaiah's prophecy, that he will be ministering to those people in the area called Galilee – Galilee of the Gentiles. Jesus is ministering to everyone, whatever their background.

And just a quick thank you to those clever people who created the lectionary – the Old Testament reading for today is indeed Isaiah chapter 9, verse 1-4 which is precisely what Matthew is quoting from. That saved me a bit of searching!

And then we get to Jesus calling the first four disciples. And the question I want us to consider this morning is, "What were these four disciples being called to do?" Over the last two or three years I have talked several times about God calling us, and us being ready to listen to those calls. Indeed, just two weeks I talked about how God, in the year 2015, called me to be ordained as a priest. But was this different?

All we are told about Jesus' ministry to date is in verse 17. "From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near"." But this is nothing new – it is what John has been saying all along. So Simon and Andrew and James and John have no expectations of what is to come; there have been no miracles, no healings, and it sounds like no new teaching, yet they are expected to drop everything, and follow Jesus so they can, "fish for people", whatever that is supposed to mean.

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There is no specific calling. There is no job description. Words like apostles or disciples are not mentioned. What are they being called to do?

Do you ever get to that stage when you are trying to work something out, and there is something at the back of your mind that you can't quite drag to the front of your mind, which you think will help? Well I definitely had one of those moments this week. Eventually I dragged my brain back to my training, during which we had a series of lessons on preaching, as you would expect and we were asked to comment on two sermons. The first of those sermons was by Mike Pilavachi – I'm sure some of you will have heard Mike preach – Mike founded and ran Soul Survivor, the national youth event which ran for many years, and he now co-leads Soul Survivor church in Watford. He has a very engaging style, likes lots of jokes and anecdotes, and has great prophetic skills. His sermon was preached from Gas Street Church, a new plant in the centre of Birmingham which looks more like a warehouse than a church. I have to say I really loved his sermon.

The other sermon was by a lady called Barbara Brown Taylor who is an American priest in the Episcopalian church, I believe in New York, and her sermon was delivered from a very high up, grand pulpit in a cathedral style church. I don't remember a great deal about her sermon but I do remember it was, at the time at least, very engaging. And Barbara Brown Taylor was that something at the back of my mind

Somewhere along the line someone recommended to me a book by her called, "The Preaching Life", the first half of which is autobiographical. She tells how she became a Christian at an early age and then moved between churches as she tried to work out what she should do with her life, never intending to be ordained. She eventually went to Yale Divinity School, felt very settled there, spent some time with the rector of the local church, graduated and spent some time in various jobs. But still couldn't work out what she was supposed to be doing with her life. It was this book and this part of this book that was stuck in the back of my mind.

This is what she wrote.

"Over the next five years I struggled with the ordination question. I read books, prayed, made appointments with my Bishop and cancelled them. I entered diocesan programmes and dropped out of them. I worked as a seminary administrator and a hospital chaplain. I took part time jobs at churches. I moved 1000 miles away and back again in eight months. I listened for voices in the night and searched the sky for signs. If lasting preoccupation with the church constitutes a call then I was called, but called to what? To be a priest, or to be a Christian? One midnight I asked God to tell me as plainly as possible what I was supposed to do.

"Anything that pleases you." That is the answer that came into my sleepyhead.

"What?" I said, waking up. What kind of an answer is that?

"Do anything that pleases you," the voice in my head said again, "and belong to me."

That simplified things considerably. I could pump gas in Idaho or dig latrines in Pago Pago, as far as God was concerned, as long as I remembered whose I was. With no further distress, I decided that it would please me to become a priest, and to spend the rest of my life with a

Day: Epiphany 3

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community willing to help me figure out what that meant. It did not strike me as an exalted idea at the time, nor does it seem so now, almost 10 years later. The one true turning point in a person's life is when he or she joins the body of Christ, however that comes about. That is the moment we join ranks with God. "

And I think that is what Jesus was calling Simon and Andrew and James and John to be – followers of Jesus – Christians as we would now call ourselves. When we accept Jesus into our lives that is what we are doing – we are putting ourselves into the position of those first four – we are accepting His call on our lives to become Christians.

But then I asked myself, how does this leave my feeling that God was very specifically calling me to be ordained back into 2015 – does not God just call us to be Christians? Perhaps in my case what He was doing was saying, "Come on David, have you not always wanted to be a priest? Well, now go on and do just that." So was it just a question of timing?

And in trying to work out the answer to that question I went back to the lectionary again to see what other readings are down for today – each day there is a psalm, an old testament reading, a new testament reading and a gospel reading. And I looked at the psalm for today and could not quite believe my eyes.

You see 10 years ago Kate and I were quite settled worshipping in a church but we were beginning to feel that we should once again be doing more than just worshipping. For a holiday that summer we signed up for a week's part retreat, part holiday at Lee Abbey in North Devon. Whilst in all honesty the retreat part was little better than OK, and the holiday part was a bit too dominated by children's meal times for our liking, we did meet a lovely family who we talked to a lot during the week. He was rector of a multi parish benefice in South Devon and one evening we talked to him a bit about our searching for what God wanted us to do. He listened and we chatted and spent a lovely evening together.

The next morning he asked to have a word with us. After breakfast we sat down together and he simply said that he thought we should look at Psalm 27, as he thought we would find it helpful. So we did. Those of you who joined the welcome service we had on Zoom when we arrived in the benefice may just remember that Psalm 27 was the reading I chose for that service. It starts off with beautiful reassuring words:

"The Lord is my light and my salvation;
so why should I be afraid?
The Lord is the fortress, protecting me from danger;
so why should I tremble?"

It carries on in this fashion for a couple more verses then we get to verse 4

"The one thing I ask of the Lord – the one thing I seek most –
is to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life,
delighting in the Lord's perfections and meditating in his Temple."

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Does that not bring us back to what Jesus calls us all to be? To be Christians? "to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life."

But finally we came to the last verse of Psalm 27, which I suspect is what we were supposed to find. "Wait patiently for the Lord. Be brave and courageous. Yes, wait patiently for the Lord."

God was, at that stage, calling us to be Christians. What we were being told 10 years ago is that at some time we may be called to do something more, or there may be something that pleases us which we can do as Christians, but until that time, just concentrating on being Christians was enough. And to me that is the message of Psalm 27 – wrapped up in all sorts of re-assuring verses.

And what is the psalm in the lectionary for today? Of course – it is Psalm 27.

So Jesus, by calling those 4 people to drop what they were doing and come with him, was calling them to be, I guess the first Christians. It is what God calls us all to be – Christians.

It is what God wants everyone in this world to be – Christians – whoever they are, wherever they live, whatever they do, whether they are tall or short, old or young, whether they are a person of colour or not, straight or gay or whatever. God loves us all, he created us all in his image, and wants us all to worship him – together.

As we now see that the message from our first three lectionary readings is that we are called to be Christians, what does the fourth reading add? That reading was the one Liz read to us earlier when we heard Paul in his 1st letter to the Corinthians appealing to his readers, "that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose." And that purpose, to belong to Christ – to be, Christians.

But doing so without disagreements is rarely easy and we in the Church of England are finding that to be the case in the area of human identity and human sexuality. We as a church are governed by a body called the General Synod, and recommendations are put to general assembly by the House of Bishops. This week the House of Bishops has published its recommendations on Human Sexuality, and they have recommended to continue the position of not allowing same sex marriages in church but to allow services of blessing of those marriages, if the local church, and the clergy member would like to do so. Speaking personally, I was extremely disappointed by this as I had hoped the church would at long last allow same sex marriages.

But then I saw a joint statement by two of the main organisations who have been campaigning for same sex marriages in church – they being inclusive church, and the Campaign for Equal Marriage in church – and what they said was, yes they were disappointed that the House of Bishops didn't feel able to go further in their recommended change, but this was a small step forward, and as such it should be seen as that – a step forward – and urged General Synod to approve it.

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Whether it will be approved we shall see, but if it is, I for one will embrace this change and make a service of blessing for a marriage conducted elsewhere, as joyful and celebratory as possible.

Because if we are to follow Paul's teaching that is what we should do. We should take every opportunity to encourage people to recognise they are called to be Christians, and if a couple want their marriage blessed by God in church then is that not a step towards them recognising that call, or to those who have already answered his call, a reaffirmation of that call.

So thank you lectionary writers. Today you have given us four bible readings that all help us in our journey with Christ. You gave us Matthew, and his call to be Christians. You gave us Isaiah and his prophecy that the call is for all to be Christians. You gave us the psalmist who wrote that the call to be Christians and worship Jesus is for every day – and the message that if we don't fully understand the call, to be patient. And then you gave us Paul who encouraged us to answer the call to be Christians, together.

Now, let each and every one of us, answer that call. Amen