

Mark 1:14-20

21.01.18

Thrown, driven, called...

Our passage from Mark's Gospel this morning invites us to consider further the theme of last Sunday's service, namely the call of God. Last week the setting was the temple in Jerusalem, centuries before Christ, where a young boy called Samuel heard his name being called. This week could hardly be more different. Swap the dark confines of the temple at night with the open space of the seashore during the day, and exchange a young boy with a bunch of seasoned fisherman, and here we are at the beginning of Jesus' ministry.

We read that this ministry begins with a proclamation: 'the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near...' and this is exciting, as for some centuries the people of Israel had been waiting for God to do something. Their nation was a shadow of what it had once been and there was a hope that God would return to his people and 'make them great again' – where have we heard that before? And now something is happening! First John the Baptist appears preparing the way, and now Jesus arrives, announcing that at last God is breaking into the world, taking a grip of his ancient people and launching a decisive new initiative. In fact what God was now doing was not what most people either expected or hoped for, but central to Jesus' strategy for asserting God's rule over the world is the gathering together of a group of people, the assembling of a band of disciples, through whom God would work and through whom God would reach out.

So Jesus comes to the lakeside and there he calls these fishermen: 'Jesus said to them, 'follow me and I will make you fish for people.' And we are told that 'immediately they left their nets and followed him.' And we need to pause and consider what on earth is going on here, for it is very strange. Here in Mark's Gospel there is no suggestion at all that these fishermen already knew Jesus or had met him or heard him preach. Jesus just appears out of nowhere, evidently a stranger, and he calls them and they respond and follow, no questions asked, leaving home, leaving family business – why would they do that?

Well maybe there were reasons why they were ready to drop everything and head off into something new. Maybe they were ready to take the risk because of the hope of something better than what they were used to. And here

we need to understand a bit about the fishing business in Jesus' day. At that time the fishing industry had become heavily regulated in order to give the Romans as much control of it as possible, to benefit them and the urban elite living in and around Jerusalem. And evidently a complex system of exorbitant leases, taxes and tolls combined to marginalize and impoverish what were formerly self-sufficient native fishing families. And as is so often the case in imperial economies – some things never change - the fish upon which local people depended as a dietary staple were increasingly exported to distant regions of the Roman empire at great profit, but mainly to the empire. In other words, the effects of political and economic power had made fishing a hard and insecure profession, which was looked down upon and despised.

So maybe the state of the fishing industry was a prompt to these men to leave their nets in search of something new. Maybe they felt a sense of disillusionment with their world which made them ready to respond to Jesus' call. And that may be part of the explanation, but it doesn't account entirely for their spontaneous abandonment of home and family and surroundings. And I'm struck by one commentator who suggests that this is not so much a 'call' story as a 'miracle' story, suggesting that the fishermen's response to Jesus' call can only be understood ultimately in divine terms: that here God was calling them and God's Spirit was prompting them to respond. In other words we have to do here not so much with human as with divine initiative. And here surely we learn something about the call of God to follow Jesus as a disciple. What motivates us? What compels us? And it may partly be down to human factors, to disillusionment or frustration with our world as it is: maybe a sense that there must be more to life than this, that somehow or other life is not delivering the goods. Or it may be an awareness that in some way our world is breaking down and collapsing – maybe we've experienced loss or betrayal or heartbreak. Or maybe it's a broader disillusionment with the state of the world, a sense – as in Jesus' day - that the political, the economic and the imperial powers that are at work are not producing the kind of world we want to live in, that deep values that we hold dear are in jeopardy. All these should be prompts that make the call of Christ, the call of his Kingdom, an invitation to something new and life-giving. But beyond all that there is also what we call the work of the Spirit, the miracle by which our spirits are opened to the divine Spirit, and our hearts prised open and reset so as to beat as one with the heart of God. And each and every one of us would have a story to tell as to how we come to be here this

morning, how the events of our lives conspired to draw us to Christ, but woven through them all is the persistent work of the Spirit of God by which it is sheer miracle that any of us are here at all. Sheer grace, sheer miracle!

So that is something of how the call of God works, but here I want to go further by taking this image of ‘calling’, of vocation, and to contrast it with two other images that are used to describe human existence – two words that have been used to portray our life as human beings in the world. And if you will humour me with a brief foray into philosophy for which I am utterly inadequately equipped, the first image comes from a twentieth century German philosopher by the name of Martin Heidegger, who described human life as ‘thrown’, as in throwing a ball. So Heidegger suggests that we are thrown into the world, by which he means that we do not choose to be here, we do not choose to be born – we simply find ourselves here. And so much of our world is simply given to us: our parents, our genes, our DNA, our upbringing, the culture in which we are brought up with its demands and conventions, and we are greatly conditioned by the past and by the decisions and initiatives of others. Heidegger’s idea of being ‘thrown’ into the world has been likened to a dog’s life - conditioned by nature and by instinct. Indeed that image was taken up by Jim Morrison of the American rock band the Doors in their song ‘Riders of the Storm’, with these lines:

Riders of the Storm
 Into this world are thrown,
 Like a dog without a bone,
 An actor out on loan.

Here we are – thrown into this world like riders pitched into a storm, conditioned like dogs for bones, actors in a play scripted by others.

For Heidegger, however, we are not entirely conditioned and there is such a thing as freedom. And the task of human existence is to make something authentic and real of ourselves in the face of all that determines and controls us – our ‘thrownness’.

So that is the first description of human life, and the second, along with ‘thrown’ is ‘driven’. This is a word that is particularly apt, I would suggest, in our contemporary world, where there are immense pressures upon us to succeed, to achieve, to get on. Often the most successful people are those who have single-minded drive that all too easily eclipses everything else – their family life, their own personal wellbeing. People who are driven are often

people who are furiously busy and need to be. They get a buzz out of accomplishment and they can be very competitive. And many of us are to some extent driven and our modern, high-speed world breeds and encourages this. And at the same time of course such a world marginalises and relegates people who are not in a position to compete, people who perhaps do not have jobs that invite great success or accomplishment, or who are cast by the wayside, the offcuts of a ruthless world – people perhaps like Andrew and James and John who struggled against the politics and economics of the empire. And I think we meet a few driven people in the Bible. Our passage introduces us to James and John, sons of Zebedee, who Jesus called here to follow him, and it's interesting that later on their mother came to Jesus and requested that her boys be Jesus' right- and left-hand men. I suspect that she was driven: a pushy mum! Or maybe Saul of Tarsus with his zeal and dedication to God's law, and his fanatical persecution of the early Christians. He was driven.

Well, that brings us to the third description of human life along with 'thrown' and 'driven' – and that is 'called'. And speaking of Saul of Tarsus, his great moment of liberation came on the Damascus Road where he heard his name called, 'Saul, Saul...' In that moment he was stopped in his tracks, halted in his driven-ness and called by love. And his entire Gospel, this gospel of grace, this good news of acceptance by God without human striving, and the role of faith in God's love: all that came from the moment when he realised that his life was to be defined not as 'driven' but as 'called'. That was his moment of emancipation.

So to us. How would you describe your life? We are all thrown into a world that is capable of great love and beauty, but which can be cruel and harsh – as it was for those fishermen in Galilee – a world in which we are 'dogged' by forces over which we have little or no control. And we aspire to make something of ourselves in that world and sometimes we struggle with the cards we have been dealt. And some of us are more or less driven, and that may bring its rewards, but peace and wholeness are not among them. But then comes Jesus, calling these fishermen, calling them to follow and calling us. To be called is to recognise that however thrown we are, however fated by blind forces, our destiny is as beloved sons and daughters of the living God. And to be called is to recognise that however driven we may be it is not finally our accomplishments that define us but the sheer grace that embraces us. And, finally, that call that summons us to Jesus is far too important to be left to us

and our response. The Spirit is at work in us, prompting us, drawing us. And hence the miracle is repeated over and over again, that miracle at the lakeside by which those fishermen dropped everything and followed Jesus. Amen.