

Prelude: Evening Hymn by Mozart played by Alan Buchan on the Viscount organ in the Manse

Words of welcome:

Each day as we awake it is to walk into the unknown. Life can be full of surprises, good and difficult, but we do not live through them alone. God has promised to lead and guide us as we put our hands in his. Our first hymn this morning is the familiar 23rd Psalm. We will listen or sing it in a version that may be a little less familiar to some of you!

Hymn: The Lord's my shepherd

Prayer:

Lord God our shepherd, who leads us by still waters and in green pastures and who does not cease to lead us and guide us when life takes us through the darkest valleys, we come to you with wonder and worship in our hearts.

You are the one who knows the past and all that it has held for us, and who lives each day with us, each moment by our side. And you, and you alone, know the future into which you are leading us moment by moment. Teach us in our worship of you to learn to trust you with our selves and our lives, with our loved ones and our church. You know what you are doing, and we so often do not!

You, Lord God, have always led your people in a tradition of change. You have never been content to let your children stand still but want to lead them on to know you more and love you better and to know ourselves loved by you in deeper ways. Keep us from the temptation of stagnation, from thinking that what we have of you and know of you is all that there is.

And hear us as we pray as Jesus taught us, saying:
Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name.
Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.
For Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

Reading: Isaiah 30:18-26

Reading: Mark 1:14-20

We are thinking today about the simplicity of following Jesus. The simplicity of the life of faith.

When you were younger, maybe you were a Scout or a Guide and played tracking games. The object of these was that one person or small group would go on ahead and leave secret signs that the next group could read to follow. They were not written down but involved things like tying a bunch of grass to point in the way to go or moving small stones to make an unobtrusive arrow. The point was that only those who knew what to look for would be able to follow, and others passing by would not even notice the directions. And sometimes we think that following Jesus is like that: having to search really hard for the secret signs, having to learn the code first before we can decipher it.

But when God spoke to his people through Isaiah, calling them back from the worship of false gods, things that were not gods, he makes it very clear that our God, the one and only God who made all things, is not a deity who wants to make things difficult. God does not try

to hide himself away, so that he is hard to find. God is merciful and gracious, hearing when people are distressed and cry out to him. And God offers direction, not by striding ahead, nor by leaving a few signposts for us to follow; there is no code or hiddenness. Rather God is as close to us as a voice in our ear saying “This is the way, walk in it.”

In the same way, when Jesus came to call his disciples, he did not heave a handbook at them, or give them a complicated set of directions to follow. He simply said, “Follow me.”

Can it really be that easy?

There is a verse in the book of Ecclesiastes which says: ...”God made human beings straightforward, but they have devised many schemes.” (Ecclesiastes 7:29) Such a succinct way of summing up a large part of the human condition – we have devised many schemes, and we think that God must be like us, and work that way as well. But God is straightforward; God who is the embodiment of all positive superlatives, is also superlatively simple. And he offers us his simplicity.

“Follow me” said Jesus. This is how he is going to show what the kingdom of God is, that kingdom which his message is all about, that kingdom which has come near. It has come near in his own person, so he invites people to come near to him and see and hear and taste and touch and smell it. And the fishermen leave their nets and follow.

They leave their nets. The simplicity of following God is found when we put things down to concentrate on him. Isaiah tells of how when the people hear that voice of God in their ear, telling them how to go, they will put aside their false gods, even though they are made of silver and gold-plate, and are beautiful and valuable things. Hearing the true God’s voice will show them for what they are – worthless – and they will be cast aside as useless and of no importance.

If we are to heed the voice of God, if we are to be enabled to follow Jesus, we need to put things down. They might be things which are good in themselves; there is no suggestion that going fishing was a wrong way of life, but anything which can distract us from following needs to be put down, laid aside. As we read last week, the author of the letter to the Hebrews, urges us to lay aside “every weight and the sin which clings so closely.” (Hebrews 12:1) Every weight *and* the sin: when we repent and turn around to follow then it is not only sin that we need to lay aside, but every weight, everything that might distract or weigh us down or hold us back. Even if they are good things in themselves. Later in the gospels you find Jesus talking about how it is important even to lay aside the ties of family if they come before God.

The first and only question is – how does this help or hinder me follow Jesus? And depending on the answer to that question, we know what weight to give any part of our lives: it is that simple.

Jesus comes to us as he came to that Galilean shore and he sees us doing whatever we are doing and he says “Follow me.”

Hymn: Will you come and follow me if I but call your name?

“Follow me,” says Jesus. “And I will make you fish for people.” And so we get the first inkling of what life in the kingdom of God is going to be about: it is going to be about reaching out to others. Note all the things Jesus didn’t say. He didn’t say where they were going, and what the end goal of the kingdom would be. He didn’t say what success would look like. He didn’t say what their new fishing would look like – we will find out more about that as we go through the gospel – nor did he say that in their new fishing there would always be a large catch, or any catch at all. He didn’t ask them to come to build and maintain a church structure, either physically or in other ways. He didn’t ask them to come and learn

how to worship God, or to study the scriptures. “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” Anything else is a potential distraction.

Even church can be a potential distraction.

It is about 22 weeks since we were able to meet together on a Sunday morning. In that time our buildings have been largely closed. We have not been able to hold services, or lunch club, or toddlers groups or Messy Church or Sunday soup and puddings or in-person Session or other committee meetings. And I know that you miss many of these things. And so do I. But I also think that this has been and is a really wonderful time for the church. Not only are our recorded services being listened to by more people than would usually cross our thresholds, but God has given us a break, a chance to lay down many things so that we can re-evaluate and think again how best we can follow Jesus. If we use our time wisely, that is. If we allow the weights of keeping things going, of feeling the need to do more and more to be taken from us.

God has given us a space to listen and to be. God has given us back the simplicity of following Jesus. We don't want to ignore God's gifts.

And this is the dangerous time. Now when the country is trying to restore some kind of pre-lockdown normality, when some of you are busy opening up parts of our community life that were also closed down, now is when people are talking about going back to normal.

What if God doesn't want us to go back? What if we shouldn't be talking about when we can do this or that *again*? God has given us a time to be simple and discover the joys of living in simplicity. God has given us time to spend with him – but that won't happen unless we resist the temptation to be busy and fill all our hours with activity. It is when we spend time with God, quietly, rejoicing in the creation around us, maybe, or speaking to God in our own expressions of creativity: it is when we take the time to read that Bible by our bedsides, which always has the possibility to surprise us; it is then that we get to know the sound of God's voice in our ear saying “This is the way, walk in it.” It is then that we can see and hear Jesus as he calls us to walk away from even the good distractions and follow him.

Our calling is not to live in the frantic way of our society, it is not to worry about what we can get for ourselves, it is not to value anything but the pure life of discipleship. Our calling is not even to maintain an institution called a church. It is to follow Jesus. God grant that we take his gift of time and space to listen and learn again and, fixing our eyes on Jesus, to follow him.

Hymn: Lord, you have come to the seashore

Prayer

Lord God, we live in a loud and distracting world. Voices and noises call to us, people expect us to fill our days, we can lose our focus on you without even really noticing it. We live in a loud and distracting world, but we live in your world. Your world made with care, and beauty and wonder and joy. Made with quiet and song and a pattern of Sabbath rest to remind us to live our days and not just go through them. You made us for this world of yours, and we ask that as we live our days, it might be in company with you, learning from you, moving with you and growing in you.

We pray for your world, for the planet itself, that you will help us find ways to live that will restore what is breaking and strengthen what is weak in your created order.

We pray for the people of your world, as we seek ways to live together, that you will curb our selfishness and release your God-given love for one another. We pray that as we find ways to live with a pandemic, here and elsewhere, love will be the key to how we treat one another, as individuals or as groups and nations.

We pray for your church, that you will loose our bondage to one way of being, and show us all the many ways that you call us to follow Jesus in the world, in love and worship, in trust and mutual caring. We pray for our own church, and for the churches in communities around us, we pray for our denomination and for our partners in Libis and Kostalec, we pray for your church across the world, that as you call to us to keep following, we would not lose sight of Jesus and tarry by the way.

Be with those who are closest to our hearts today, to our families and friends, those who are ill and sad and suffering. May the knowledge of your loving presence be with them to ease them.

We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

Hymn: Forth in thy name, O Lord I go

Benediction

May the peace of the Lord Christ go with you,
Wherever he may send you.
May he guide you through the wilderness,
Protect you through the storm.
May he bring you home rejoicing at the wonders he has shown you.
And may the blessing of God Almighty,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit rest on you now and forever.
Amen.

Postlude: Gavotte by Samuel Wesley played by John Crombie