

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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SETTING OUT AND FOLLOWING

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This sermon has two different endings, for two different churches.

Isaiah 9:1-7

Matthew 4:12-25

The first days in a new job are always scary. You may remember that from your own first job and first days. You don't know exactly what you are doing and what should be done next, and you worry that you might get something wrong. I wonder if it felt that way for Jesus when he finally set out on his ministry? In the desert, Jesus dealt with his inner temptations to test God and to take power and glory to himself instead of deflecting it to God. Now Matthew shows us how he set about his ministry, how he began to be about God in his world.

The first thing he does is to move house. We always think of Jesus as living in Nazareth, and he did grow up there. But he grew up, and like most young adults, he left home. (Though reports this week say a quarter of young adults still live with their parents in these high-rent, hard-to-get-a-mortgage days.) Mark talks about his home being in Capernaum – it was Jesus' own house which the four friends took the roof off to lower in their paralysed companion to get to Jesus. Luke shows us the people in Nazareth rejecting him so violently that they try to kill him – so it is no wonder that he wants to put some distance between himself and them. He also wants to put some distance between himself and people who know his background – the carpenter's son. This isn't because there was anything to be ashamed of in being a joiner, but because he knows that if that is remembered too clearly then there are many in society who will write him off without giving him a hearing first. So he moves to Capernaum to make that his base. Capernaum was a village or small town on the north shore of the sea of Galilee.

Matthew has it that Jesus moved here to fulfil prophecy. Certainly prophecy was fulfilled by his being there, but most of us have complex reasons for doing almost everything, and Jesus was no exception. Capernaum was a better base for him than Nazareth.

And now Jesus begins to teach and preach, and, did you notice, he starts with exactly the same message as John the Baptist: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." He is going to start exactly where John left off. And that is always going to be the core of the message. The kingdom of heaven has come near. God's space has invaded human space. The two are becoming one. And they are doing it in the person of Jesus. It is tremendous news, it is what people have been waiting for, and it demands a response. You can't celebrate the coming near of the kingdom of heaven without also taking on the need to repent, to turn around, to change how you live.

What sort of change? Well, Matthew shows us graphically in what happens next. Jesus has begun to teach, a lone voice in the lake-shore communities, and next he begins to challenge individuals to show how his teaching has changed their lives, to show how they are turning around, by leaving their old way of life and coming with him. He comes to Peter and Andrew, he comes to James and John and he says "Follow me." John's gospel has shown us Andrew and then Peter meeting Jesus before, while John the Baptist was still doing his preaching. John shows us Andrew as one of John's disciples switching his allegiance to Jesus and bringing Peter with him.

It seems that for a while – perhaps for that time when Jesus is in the wilderness and setting up his new base in Capernaum, Andrew and Peter, while still thinking of themselves as disciples – learners - of Jesus, went on with their old work. Many followers of Jesus from his day onwards, have been encouraged to remain in their old jobs and home communities to bear witness there. But Jesus also needed then, as he does now, some who will leave the way of life they know, the way of life that others live, and live in a different way, to further the good news. As fishermen, Andrew and Peter would most often be sleeping by day and awake and working by night, and that is going to limit what they can learn from Jesus and how much they can pass on to others. And Jesus tells them that now is the time to put their commitment on the line and follow him. And they do. Maybe they have been waiting and hoping for this call. Not all young men want to follow the future which family tradition and circumstance lay out for them. There was adventure and challenge in following Jesus. There still is. There was the lure of the unknown – a lure which maybe gets less strong for some of us as we grow older, but which is very real for many younger people.

Jesus calls Peter and Andrew, James and John to demonstrate repentance, by leaving their old securities and coming with him. He asked them to take the risk. He is quite clear about why they should as well. They are not to follow him just so that they can enjoy his company, although they will. They are not to follow him just so that others can see that they are chosen. They are to come with him so that he can use them to attract others. Their repentance means that the attitude of their lives, as well as the way that they live, is to be changed. As fishermen they lived to catch enough to provide for themselves and their families and, if they are lucky, put a little by for a rainy day. Now they are to look outward, and live to help transform their society – and, as they were later to understand – the world, by bringing people to Jesus.

In the next few weeks we will hear some of the many profound changes in thinking and action which Jesus will tell us he expects from us if we are to be part of the kingdom of heaven which has drawn near, if we are to delight in it by showing our repentance. But today we see it in general terms by the calling of the fishermen to leave everything and follow.

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near. It really does mean a radical transformation. In fact Matthew's use of the prophecy of Isaiah, that prophecy which we usually think of during Advent, shows how radical the change is to be. He quotes only the start of the passage, but all good Jews, and he was writing for good Jews, would know that Isaiah goes on to talk of the end of oppression (hooray!) and also the end of warfare. Isaiah is talking of God's kingdom coming, not be war and conquest and violent resistance, such as many Jews of Jesus day, and perhaps even more of Matthew's day of the time when Matthew wrote his gospel, were expecting, hoping for and, some of

them, planning. Repent here includes turning away from these plans and trusting God. The Jews who hoped for resistance thought they were radical: Jesus' call to repentance is far more radical than that.

And then lastly today we saw Jesus making a preaching and healing tour of Galilee. He goes through the north country – Syria here refers to a Roman province of Palestine by that name, not the country we now know – and very soon people realise that he is literally a God-send for the sick. They bring him demoniacs, epileptics, paralytics and people suffering various pains and diseases, and he cures them all. Jesus has realised that he is to be about God, and God is about curing the hurts in lives and society, and putting right what is wrong. God is about, and so Jesus is about, redeeming the world from its fallen state and restoring it to its creator's intentions. And although the great work of redemption will not be accomplished until Calvary, Jesus begins with where he is and who he sees. He begins, not with the powerful in palaces and temple courts, but with those who did not count in society, letting them know that they were loved, that for him they did count – they counted for a lot.

And so a crowd gathers. Not a crowd of the influential, not a crowd which can offer him much help in his ministry, but a crowd of the desperate and hopeful: a crowd of those who know their need of God's love more than most. Later on Jesus' ministry will take him among the powerful of the land, but he is for God and he will live by God's priorities. God does not regard those with worldly power as the most important. God sees those who are left out and discounted as most needing his love. So Jesus starts there.

Jesus started his ministry. Maybe he wasn't sure just what to do first, but he did something. And then he could take it from there and work with the reactions he got. We don't know how long this period in his life lasted, probably at least a few months. It takes a while for news to travel and to be believed and crowds to become a normal happening. There may have been times when Jesus wondered if he was doing it right, if the people were only coming to him for healing and not to learn about God. But he acted.

As Jesus' followers, we too must act. We must think and pray before we act, but we must never let that be a substitute for action. A few years ago when the churches in this presbytery were completing Vision Days to help us plan for work in the area, one of the churches, not Laggan or St. Bride's – found it very hard to come up with what their plans for the future were. They would get as far as “We will pray about it” but no further. Prayer is good, it is essential. But we are not following Jesus unless we also act.

Move boldly, as we said a couple of weeks ago, for there is a hand above that will guide you. We have seen John the Baptist moving boldly and now we see Jesus also boldly setting out, very likely with fear and trembling, or he wouldn't be human, but doing something. It has been said of the Christian life that we are like a boat. Boats on dry land are very hard to move and to direct. But once they are under way in the water a small nudge on a rudder will alter their direction. So with us, as a church and as individuals within the church. If we just sit around and think about following Jesus, and pray about following Jesus, then we may never get the impetus to move at all. But if, in God's name, we do something, - almost anything – then God will direct us as to how to live and what to do next.

NEWTONMORE

We have seen it in this church, you know. For a long time – and I know this because when I first came I read back years of Session meeting minutes - people wondered and fretted about how to bring more young life into the church. But eventually a couple of people said “We want to start a Toddler's Group. “ It was called “Bounce and Rhyme” at first, but now it is Rhyme Time. And it has changed it's format as it has grown and discovered who it is and what it is for. But it has been a real blessing to many. And from that some more of us got confidence to say “Let's try Messy Church,” ad we wondered if anyone would come. And now we are beginning to think about having a week's holiday club this summer. Our ideas of what is church have grown along with what we have been doing. Probably you always knew that church wasn't just the building and being church wasn't just for Sunday morning; but now we see some of what that means in practice. And God will continue to steer us and lead us on, because in his name we are trying to follow and serve.

Jesus took a deep breath and started on his ministry. As those whom he has called to follow, to make radical changes in our lives so that we can put him first, let us continue to take the deep breaths of faith and move out to meet the needs of the people among whom we live. Amen.

LAGGAN

We have seen it in this church. First impressions of Laggan church were of a faithful group of people who were glad that as a church they could survive. But then we appointed some new elders, and then we did a Future Focus programme, and then we began to implement our goals. Do you know what I notice different every week in Laggan now than when I first met you: the singing is better! And that is no small thing, because we sing and praise God out of our conviction and our sense of purpose, and our joy at being in his place as his people. And yes, we have seen the occasional children's day run, and some Laggan children come to Rhyme Time and Messy Church in St. Bride's. And yes, we have seen the church and community picnics take off in a big way. And yes, we have a web presence now and welcome packs for newcomers and we have even begun to sometimes take our presence and the joy of our worship to Dalwhinnie. When we are afloat and moving, God steers us and leads us forward. Amen.