

Sermon preached at St James's Piccadilly London

Matthew 4.12-23

The Revd Ivan Khovacs / 22 January 2017

DROP YOUR NETS AND FOLLOW

A story for Epiphany. A guild of chandlers got together to put on an Epiphany play. It was around the year 1500, in the market town of Wakefield, in West Yorkshire. The candle makers invited everyone in the town to take part in the play. Everyone that, is, except for the clergy. They wanted a play that spoke to them – not in church jargon and doctrine – but in the everyday language they knew from work, and from everyday life in York in the 16th century.

But most of all they wanted a play with laughter. So there was no question about inviting over-educated clergy who invariably take themselves far too seriously. Clergy certainly wouldn't have liked that in the chandlers' play, there is Mary and the angels, and there are shepherds, but there are no wise men, not from the East and not from anywhere else. In fact, in this play, it's not kings from afar, but the shepherds who bring gifts to Jesus.

It was a simple play, but it was immediately loved by the people. And it was so successful that the play was performed many times over in Chester by guilds of house painters and glass workers. And again in Coventry, by cloth cutters and tailors.

I'm talking of course about one of the Medieval Mystery Plays—part of that collection of dramas bringing to life biblical stories by setting them in scenarios familiar from everyday life. This had the effect of creating what we might call a grassroots or "home grown" theology. It was a way the people had

of asking themselves difficult questions about faith: like, **do we know what we are doing when we commit to follow Jesus? How exactly do we give God anything, let alone everything?**

In the play, three shepherds arrive in Bethlehem with their gifts – not gold, frankincense, and myrrh – but a cluster of cherries, and, curiously, a bird. The gifts may be modest, although Cherries in December, in the North of England, don't come cheap, not now, and not in Mediaeval Yorkshire. But who they give them to makes all the difference. **In Jesus' hands, these humble offerings become signs of salvation.** Cherries in December speaking of Christ the Son who sheds his blood for humanity's salvation. And what about the bird? Does it sit on the baby's arm as a preview of the Resurrection: signaling that he will one day rise to heaven as humanity's hope for Salvation?

But the third shepherd brings a different kind of gift: it isn't useful, it isn't particularly valuable, and it isn't symbolic of any part of the biblical story.

THIRD SHEPHERD (presenting his gift)
Hail, darling dear, full of Godhead!
I pray thee be near when that I have need.
My heart would bleed
To see thee here so poor in esteem.
Hail, sweet is thy cheer!
Hold forth thy small hand:
I bring thee a ball.
Have thou and play withal!

A cluster of cherries, a bird, and, most unexpected of all, a ball, signaling joy, play, and the innocence and sheer abandon of a child's growing up years, something even gold, frankincense and myrrh cannot buy. Simple but effective: a theology about what we might have to offer God. **How exactly do we give God anything, let alone everything?**

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That's the question at the heart of today's Gospel. And the problem for us is that you and I might read it and decide that, somehow, this story of the calling of the first disciples, has something to do with us in a way we hadn't noticed before. Because regardless of how long we may have been on the Christian journey, we might just decide that following Jesus, is something you and I need to do today with fresh conviction, or in a way we didn't particularly ask for, or in some way pointing to change and, therefore, to the unknown. **And very quickly we recognise that this Gospel could be seriously disruptive if we decide that following Jesus means offering God everything.**

"As Jesus walked by the sea, he saw two brothers, Simon and Andrew, casting a net into the lake—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, 'Follow me.' And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James and John, in the boat with their father, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and they followed him."

I remember as if it was yesterday the moment I read this passage about Jesus and the calling of the first disciples. I was seventeen, in a study lounge, with other students doing their work. I came across this passage, and the penny dropped! I remember saying out loud: "I get it! Jesus is calling me, and I need to drop

whatever nets are holding me back, and follow him!" My friends looked up from their work and said, "Okay. That's cool..." And they returned to their reading.

In a way I've been asking that question in different ways at various points in my Christian faith journey: what are the nets I need to drop and leave behind, and follow him?

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I was heartened to see at yesterday's Women's March on London people in great numbers representing men and women in their diversity, from many walks of life, all age groups, and with varying degrees of political energy—some were angry, others vented frustration relating to Brexit and a growing sense of xenophobia. One protester simply carried a placard reading **"Too much fit on one sign."**

But on the whole, it was the response of women to Trump's election that remained at the fore. I was specially glad to see young women – around the age group I teach at university – reclaiming with conviction contested public space: they want their voice heard. And they demand the right to be respected, as persons, as women in public, as equals before the law.

It's too easy to fall for the idea that young people, specially those who come from a financially comfortable background, simply don't care. And that those who have no money, and assurances about education and jobs in their near future are simply too cynical or apathetic to care. That's clearly not true; and if yesterday is any indication ... young people care, and they believe that their voice counts for something. They believe that they can make a difference.

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On the other hand, I was observed with interest that there was no obvious, outward and explicit show of Christians in the crowds. There were of course many Christians, and many people from our churches in London and other cities taking part in the march. Including of course some of you from this congregation. The Christian presence was obvious even on social media.

But we know that a very public Christian response to the politically-hardening climate, here and in America, would be divisive in our church communities. It sounds strange to have to spell it out, but let's be clear: it would polarise fellow Christians who EITHER don't share the same convictions (or perhaps not to the same degree), or who simply don't express themselves in a public way. It's important to respect that.

And it would be presumptuous for any one group of Christians to try to speak for all Christians. None of us would want to be "represented" by others without our explicit consent.

As you might imagine, the marches were different in America, where religion plays a part in public life and social discourse. And not always for good reason, and not always with good results, as we know. Here, things are different. Expressing faith in public can be a tricky business.

Nevertheless, it was reassuring to see the generally and maybe overwhelmingly positive reaction to the election of Sadiq Khan, the first Muslim mayor of a major western capital city. But on the whole, faith in this country, and perhaps most notoriously Christian faith, negotiates a delicate balance between the private, personal sphere and the more formal role that religion plays in public life, so for example, in civic occasions like Remembrance

Sunday. Or indeed as part of the ethical formation of children in schools: there, too, the religious fabric of the society, in its full diversity, is given a significant space, and most notably, in assemblies and RE.

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In the end, though, I am only too aware how difficult and even costly it can be for some people to publicly acknowledge their Christian faith. For others, it might be more straightforward: in the end, didn't Jesus warn us – in Matthew 6 – against parading our religion in public?

I am also aware that even for me, talking about faith in public is never easy. Talk about God outside the church and the comfort of the liturgy is always full of risk. So, if I happen to be in conversation with someone in public about Christian faith, or about God, or about my beliefs, – and it does happen, all the time, it seems – I always wonder, will my listener misunderstand me; could my listener willfully misunderstand me; could they use what I say against me. On the other hand, will I be sensitive to my listener; could I unwittingly stir up past hurts and uncomfortable emotions in my listener?

And yet there must be times when you or I wish we could be more open and talk about God in public, but simply can't bear the thought of embarrassment, or possibly something worse.

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Here's my story. I was on the underground, got on a train, and took the only open seat. It was only then that I realised the appearance of the man sitting to my right. His face was covered completely in tattoos of swastikas and other neo-nazi symbols, and he had a few pounds of ironmongery pierced into or

otherwise attached to various parts of his face, neck and ears. He wore chunky steel rings projecting various messages of hate. Bu the pièce de résistance was the pair of metal horns the man had had surgically implanted into his forehead. Everyone on the train was holding their breath: there I was in my clerical collar, and there he was in his devil horns gleaming in the greenish light.

I tried to take shallow breaths, made no unnecessary movements, and kept myself to myself. **Christian, I confess that at that moment, I was too preoccupied and distracted to notice the extraordinary in the ordinary.**

Thankfully, the man got off only a few stops later. The whole car let out a collective sigh of relief. It was only then that I was able to put together a coherent thought. In fact, I thought about what I would have wanted to say to the man, if I only could muster up the courage. Or the foolishness.

Again, I did not speak to him. And this isn't how things went. But in a different scenario, this is what would have happened:

I'm on the underground, get on a train, and take the only open seat. That guy next to me has his whole face covered in tattoos: mostly swastikas and neo-nazi symbols; ironmongery all over the face; chunky steel rings looking for a face to smash in; and to top it all off, a pair of horns surgically implanted into his forehead. The whole train is holding its breath: me in my clerical collar, he in his satanic horns catching the light.

I take shallow breaths, making no unnecessary moves, keeping myself to myself. Then I turn to the man and, choosing my words carefully, I say, "I've gotta hand it to you; it really takes some commitment to go around dress as you do."

Then – get this – the guy turns to me and says: "Funny, I was thinking the same thing about you."

Now that didn't happen. I didn't say a thing to him in the end. But I think he would have been a fascinating person to talk with about God.

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I find our Gospel passage both comforting and troubling.

There is absolutely no indication that Jesus is looking for anything in particular in his first disciples. Why choose these disciples and not others? The passage from Matthew's Gospel is repeated almost word-for-word in Mark's Gospel. But neither Gospel writer has anything to say about anything Jesus was looking for by way of qualification in his disciples. He doesn't seem interested in their skills, or in whatever gifts on how to make friends and influence people. The message is clear: the only thing that counts is – well, everything! – a life-changing response from the disciples when Jesus says to them, "Come. Follow me...."

But can they possibly know what Jesus is calling them to? Do they know what it will cost them to drop their nets and follow him? Do we?