



WORLD CHURCH SUNDAY

Sermon preached by the Revd Dr Jonathan Soyars of Westminster College on Sunday 24 January 2021.

Text: Mark 1.14-20

Although we have not all met in person, I thank Nigel for his invitation to offer a word to you on this World Church Sunday. It is my privilege to do so. With the primary witness of the disciples of Jesus in Mark's gospel before me, I take as my sermon's theme the idea of Christian vocation, of calling, and I hope to connect it with the witness of the world church. I must admit to a bit of worry as I wonder what new thing I might say about one of the most well-known stories in the Christian Bible. Then again, maybe what I say should not be new at all. Instead, maybe I should offer a reminder of time-tested truths that bear repeating in our particular time, marked as it is by feelings of disconnection, of physical, emotional, and spiritual exhaustion, perhaps even of fear that God has forgotten us or we God, as the Covid-19 pandemic continues to disrupt and dominate our lives.

Today, I shall make three points. First, Christian vocation can only be a response to something God is already doing. Second, Christian vocation unfolds in concert with others. And, third, Christian vocation rarely includes a clear vision of exactly where or to what one is called. These three ideas — response, connection, and openness — might serve us well as we ask what our proper place and part might be in the world church, in the community of God's faithful in this country, in this particular congregation here in Cambridge.

To the first point. Christian vocation is a faithful response to something God is already doing, or else it is not really one's calling. Another way to put this is to recognise that before God calls, God is, and God acts; so God calls us into who God is and what God is doing in the world. We see this truth reflected in our reading from Mark. Before Jesus calls Simon, Andrew, James, and John by the lake, Mark describes how Jesus was already active in the region of the Galilee. Our Christ went about proclaiming what the gospel-writer labels 'the good news of God' (v. 14), the recognition that 'the kingdom of God has come near', and that it mattered. Before making that time-shattering announcement in the Galilee, Mark tells us how Jesus himself was proclaimed God's beloved and well pleasing son at his baptism (v. 11). And it was upon that divine son that God's very spirit descended in the form of a dove (v. 10), a spirit that would nudge and nurture Jesus's ministry. You see, in our story the disciples are called by one who was, in a sense, himself called. They join what God was doing in and through another person, and they join that person in his holy and already happening work.

The truth is that we can only respond to our calling as those disciples did to theirs if we are really listening for it. By this I do not mean simply hearing, but really, truly listening. There is a difference between the two, is there not? I sometimes wonder what would have happened if Jesus's first disciples were hearing but not listening to one who called them. Perhaps his summons would have sounded like empty words. His claim to make them 'fish for people' (v. 17) might have seemed even more nonsensical than it does to us. Maybe the soon-to-be former fishermen would have feared the risks to their livelihoods and even their lives, should the occupying Romans learn they were associating with a potential insurrectionist. In the mystery of God, though, they were listening, as they made their living with nets and boats that day by the lake. For they were open to an in-breaking of God's call in their lives, however bizarre, however brash it might have seemed. That openness to vocation, indeed to an altogether new and different vocation, was apparently linked with a willingness to respond to what, to whom, they listened. Do you listen, actively, for one beckoning you to join God's ongoing work, like they did?

Just as Christian vocations connect us with what God is already doing, they also unfold in concert with others. God does not call us alone, nor are we called to work for and with God alone. No, Mark's passage teaches clearly that we are called together and to work together, and on this point Matthew and Luke unsurprisingly agree. In their common telling, Jesus did not call Simon individually, then Andrew individually, then James individually, and so on. Each one is called with the other who makes up their pair, and those familiar with the rest of the story know they will work collectively with Jesus as that story develops. If their prior occupation to fish or mend nets required a partner, by inference their new one will as well, for their 'catch', if we might call it that, will be more numerous, more substantial, more significant. Mark's text even implies a temporal and a physical closeness to these callings, as if to drive the point home. After beckoning the two brothers 'casting a net into the sea' (v. 16), Mark states that Jesus only 'went on a little farther' before doing the same to the brothers 'in their boat mending the nets' (v. 19). We can take comfort, we can find strength, I think, in this simple phrase, 'a little farther.' As weighty, as impossible, as our vocation might seem when considered on its own and on our own, right behind us and right before us God calls another one too, one who is likely as uncertain of their calling as we are of ours, but to whom we can turn, with whom we can find solidarity, and near whom we can labour when our labour is long. In those personal connections a concert is made, when the symbolic sound of our vocation joins and resonates with that of others.

Herein lies the relevance for us on this World Church Sunday. In all likelihood, those with whom we are called by God to toil will be different from us, sometimes in stark ways. I cannot pretend to know the demographics of Britain well yet, because I am a new immigrant myself. So I will take a step back, or a step up, and commend to you instead an infographic I recently encountered online in the *World Christian Encyclopedia* published by Edinburgh University Press, entitled 'The world as 100 Christians.' You can find it easily online when you have time and opportunity; just Google 'The world as 100 Christians'. This infographic is rather revealing. It suggests that nearly half the world's Christians are Catholic; the same number have no internet access; over a third inhabit so-called 'low development' countries; more than a quarter are under the age of 15; only one-tenth speak our language, English; more than two-thirds live somewhere besides Europe or North America. As Dr Gina Zurlo, who is Co-Director of the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in the US and who developed the report summarised, 'A typical Christian today is a non-white woman living in the global South, with lower-than-average levels of societal safety and proper health care. This represents,' Dr Zurlo reminds us, as she put it, 'a vastly different typical Christian than that of 100 years ago, who was likely a white, affluent European.' And yet we and those beautifully different folk are called as Christians together, by the same God, into the same work of God, each of us contributing the vigour and the vibrancy of our own vocations.

I wonder... in the days ahead, how might we in Britain honour the vocations and gifts of our fellow 2.5 billion Christians around the globe? Will we do so in ways that are more authentic, more responsible, more mutual, more life-giving than our forebears did in decades and centuries past? Thanks be to God that the age of colonising mission is over, even if its effects endure. Now the promise of partnership, of collaboration, with Spirit-filled Christians, some like us, many not, here at home and abroad, looms large. Such partnerships, such collaborations, if they are to be real and to endure, will require of us a genuine posture of humility, of empathy, of solidarity. And, I suspect, it should probably cost us something, something financial, something material. But we have much to share, do we not? And we can begin right now, right here in Cambridge, working together with our fellow faithful to confront constructively things like homelessness, and climate change, and the deep loneliness experienced by students who come from abroad to study in this great university city. On these and many other challenges we can learn from and labour with those people of faith whose backgrounds and wisdom and ways of worshipping differ from ours, yes, but which still speak to our present and signal a future more wholesome and bright. May we and they follow the Lord who once called by the lake together.

Finally, my third point, which Mark teaches us well. Christian vocation rarely identifies where or to what exactly one is called. Certain among us might sense a great deal about how, in what ways we are called. But unknowns remain, even for those with some clarity. The four fisherman by the Sea could hardly have known what their decision to follow Jesus that day and the day after and the day after would bring. Surely they did not know the parts big and small they would play in his story, and by extension in ours. They did

not know the villages they would follow him into. They did not know the size of the crowds they would help Jesus feed, the poor for whom with him they would care, the outcasts, the strangers who would take up place beside them as they attempted to follow faithfully too. They did not know the guilt by association they would endure from family and friends, from leaders religious and political too. Even so, Mark suggests, they were open, apparently. Open to a future not fully clear, open to setting aside a past and a present that felt familiar, and to step forward into a future unknown with the One whom, in Mark's telling, they hardly knew. They did this 'immediately' (v. 18). Will we likewise be open, especially in this season when too much feels closed, and then after?

And so my sermon comes to a close. But before it ends, with Mark's story still before us and with the witness of four fishermen fresh in mind, I invite you, I challenge myself: this day and every day, respond faithfully to Christ, who calls you, repeatedly, into God's gracious, ongoing work. Look for others from around the world on the journey, and join what they with God are doing. But remember... the end of the journey we share is not yet known, only the One who waits for us and guides us there. So let us answer our calls, however unclear they might seem. Clarity will come. Or maybe not. But the One who calls remains close, just a little farther along, wherever our vocation might lead.