

21st January 2018

Preacher: Jennifer Smith

Hymns: 443 Come, let us sing of a wonderful love
636 O love that wilt not let me go
660 Called by Christ to be disciples
673 Will you come and follow me
623 A safe stronghold our God is still

Readings: Jonah 3.1-5, 10
Mark 1. 14-20

Prayer

Holy God, break your word among us as bread for the feeding of our souls. And may the words of my lips, and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength, and our redeemer. Amen.

Walking from my front door to the coop on Old street last night, I counted 28 direct commands, calls if you will: turn left! Love life, love our food! Run well! Come in, sale continues! Warning, danger of death!

28 direct commands, and these were only the ones in printed words that I noticed!

Friends, we live in a world full of call. Full of contradictory, inviting, some life giving calls on our attention, and directions to do things.

Your attention is worth money, and because we are all programmed from generations to look for stimuli in our environments, we jump every time.

Have you ever tried NOT reading a flashing sign? It is hard.

Today's passages are about CALL, as were last week's. And hearing well is important.

I'll admit that with our Gospel today, even as I hear it (I will make you fish for people) I hear the old translation – I will make you fishers of men.

I am completely committed to the new translation not just to be nice, but because it is more true to Jesus message - But when I hear our Gospel today I still hear 'I will make you fishers of men.'

Hearing well is important: I will make you fishers of men – or as Jennifer Potter has admitted to me someone she was in college had heard it, 'I will make you vicious old men.' I will make you vicious old men.

NOT what Jesus said, and frankly, enough of us men, and women get there on our own without any help from Jesus. This was not Jesus call.

Hearing well is important.

A friend, who is a priest, and a fine one sent me a whatsapp on Thursday night – she has to take a decision about her direction at work, and had asked my advice.

Jen, how do you know discern where God is calling?

How do we hear? Moses got a burning bush – to be fair, it still took him 3 chapters of scripture into the Exodus to stop quibbling and go. Me, show me a burning bush and hear the voice of God speak from it, I am there.

Even Jonah, our beloved Jonah of Sunday school lessons about the big fish who spewed him up onto dry land in the verse just before what we heard – there's no ambiguity – God said, 'Go to Nineveh.' Ok he had a little detour on the way, and via the fish, but God spoke and Jonah heard – even if he didn't like it.

How do we hear? And hear well? How can we be sure we aren't hearing the voice of pride, or hope, or simple blessed-mindedness instead of Jesus' call? How can we be sure we're not mishearing?

Because friends, Jesus is still calling amidst and even in the noise of daily life. Every day, every one of us. How are we listening?

I want to suggest three things about listening well, ways we can test to discern how we are being called: to answer my friend's question she put up there on whatsapp – how can you tell what God is asking of you? How can you sort out the voice of culture, and politics, and pride, and every other influence on us?

First, that we listen where and when we are right now – in context. Second that we listen expecting to change and follow – in motion. Thirdly that the call we hear is never separate from the caller himself – in carnate – that is, the call we hear, together and as individual people, is always going to lead us more towards Jesus himself. If it doesn't, friends I think we may be getting a powerful message, but it is not from God and it is not of Christ.

In context, in motion, incarnate.

First, that we listen in context. That is, like everyone else and certainly all the folk in our scripture who hear the call, we need to listen not for their call, but for our own. In our own context – where we are, and when we are.

Jesus called those men where they were already at work. By the shores of the sea of Galilee – and in the midst of their normal day. They had not gone on a special listening trip, or stopped what they were doing in case God might speak – Jesus spoke right in their normal context, in the language of their normal context – I will make you fish for people.

Which rather means to me that God's call to us is going to be similarly in the midst of where we are already – not necessarily stay there, but in the midst of our normal everyday. Our where, Our when, using the skills and stuff we already have.

Me, I'm no fisherwoman. I had a great Aunt jeano who tried with me in Vermont – she taught me to thread the worm on the hook; I could do that. She taught me to cast the line – to pull my rod back to the side so I didn't lodge the hook in my little brother; I could do that. To keep it moving so it didn't catch in weeds under water, to feel for the nibble as the fish caught the hook – I could do that.

But I was no fisherwoman. I love eating fish, but I just did not have the patience to sit and wait, I felt bad for the fish once I'd looked it in the eye, and as I knew I was fishing only for fun, not to avoid hunger, I mainly threw it back.

Here is news: God is unlikely to call me in language or the context he called those men on that shore by the sea of Galilee: they were fishermen. I am not.

God does not call us to be Andrew, or Simon, or Peter or the rest, he calls us in ourselves, where and when we are right now and with whatever we have to hand. Are you the parent of a baby? Are you a worker with papers and contracts? Do you build things or make things, or look after people in organisations who do, there and then you can expect Jesus to come strolling by.

Do you have a gift of patience? Are you good at counting numbers, or making words come together? Or healing people's bodies? And not just things like that that we think of as our skills, the assets we bring that we are happy to put in the top line of our CV – other things.

Do you have the experience of tragedy? Of sleepless nights, or worry? Do you know what it is to rage at an injustice? Do you know something about feeling overwhelmed by what you see, and still trying to do your little bit?

Then there is your nets, here is your seaside, where Jesus is most likely to be speaking.

Do you have the experience of loving someone so much, and grieving their choices? Or of loving a country or a church so much, and grieving its choices?

Here is the skill of your hands, here are your boats this is your fishing ground – this is where God will call.

You don't have to go to the sea of Galilee hoping to hear an echo of someone else's call, Jesus will speak through scripture right where we are. To what you have. In context.

And if we are most likely to hear a call in context, we are more likely to hear if we are used to being in motion. Early Christians were called 'people of the way.' People who were by intention not waiting and watching the world as a passive observer, but already trying to live more like Jesus each day. Just a little bit more, today, tomorrow – just a little bit more. Already in motion. We hear a lot right now about

self care – about self nurture, mindfulness, intentional living – these are good things. But we have a leg up on the whole self help industry!

John Wesley spoke a lot about the means of grace – the things we were given by God to get us ‘in motion:’ the works of piety like the Lord’s Supper, prayer and study of scripture, and then those work of mercy, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the prisoner – he didn’t intend the use of these means of grace to be when we feel like it, or when we are aware of needing them – but means given to us for our daily habit – what our President of Conference Lorraine Mellor calls our ‘five a day’ of Christian discipleship.

In motion, we are more likely to hear the call – our feet already raised to take the step that the immediately implies.

We can’t do everything, and here is good news, we are not called to do everything. But we are certainly not called to do nothing.

In motion, we already know ourselves to be involved in this world – to be on a journey with it. Responding to it, involved, responsible, and powerful. Friends people work very hard to get your attention – to sway your opinion, to manipulate how you spend, and vote, and what you think is good or bad. Your attention and how you spend it, your money and where you put it, how you use it – is powerful.

Advertisers know it, social media companies know it, political parties and folk who make a living out of suggesting to us who to fear or who to favour know it. Maybe it is time a few more of us woke up to it: You are powerful.

In context, in motion.

And always, when we are testing to find out how we are called – to hear well – we are called in-carnate – to become every day a bit more like Jesus.

Not to become little Jesus holier than thou robots, please – but to become most wholly ourselves as we follow Christ.

A call to each of us, as we hear it, may make life less pleasant, or give us more work – or bring confusion or change we did not expect. Real confusion, real change. Just ask Jonah.

But it will not take us to use other people as instruments for our own ends, because that was not the way of Jesus.

It will not take us to lie, or to dodge a truth – that is not the way of Jesus.

It will not have us abusing the weak to keep a status quo, or building walls to defend our culture or nation – Jesus had more confidence than that.

It will have us finding compassion and forgiveness for the ones who hurt us. Jesus was like that.

It will find us sticking with people we disagree with, and humbly suggesting another way, while being kind. And truthful. Jesus was like that.

It will find us empowering each other to make good choices – Jesus gave away power and helped people use it. I will make you fishers of people. Not, never ever vicious old men.

The call of God in our lives comes in context, in motion, in-carnate.

Friends, if we want to share our faith, this way of life with other people, it is not because we are trying to be successful, or to build the church, or even to 'save' the world. God has that covered.

If we want to share our way of life it is because it is true. It speaks of the deepest truth we know, that this creation tends towards life. That even now bulbs and grass, even weeds are pushing up between the most carefully laid paving stones – a small tree root over years can lift concrete you and I could not shift with all our might. Such is the unlikely power of our crucified, risen, and ascended Lord.

This is good news. Comfort, release, rest justice and love. Listen well. The kingdom of God today is come near – just where you are, when we are. On the journey one step at a time, towards Christ and together.

Amen.