**Matthew 4:12-23**

**“I will make you fish for people”**

Last week, we thought about Luke’s version of the first day of Jesus’ ministry; how Jesus went into the synagogue and took the scroll of Isaiah and read a portion of it and then announced that the Kingdom of God had come - that it was for the here and now: for today.

Today, we are looking at Matthew’s version of the start of Jesus’ ministry. Not necessarily the first day of his ministry as Luke offered us but certainly an insight into the early days and weeks of his ministry. And the message that Luke puts on Jesus’ lips, and the message that Matthew puts on Jesus’ lips, may be worded differently: but it’s the same message. In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus says this: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has chosen me to bring good news…” In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus says this: “Turn away from your sins, because the Kingdom of heaven is near!” Now, these may sound very different – but actually the meaning of them is very similar.

Let’s think a bit more deeply about Matthew’s words here: “The Kingdom of heaven is near!”

This is quite a difficult verse, because what does the word ‘near’ actually mean? Does it mean that the kingdom of God is here, now – actually present amongst us - or that it is almost here, just over the horizon, as it were? If we take an honest look at the state of the world today, let alone 2000 years ago, it would be hard to argue that the kingdom of God is here in its totality, and yet we do want to believe that it is, in some sense, already here.

Perhaps Jesus is not announcing an actual time when the Kingdom of heaven has come, like an hour that can be read on a clock or a date that can be marked in a diary. Perhaps Jesus is instead alerting us to the possibility of encountering the kingdom of God at any given moment in historical time if we repent and believe. Whenever you repent, whenever you believe, the time has come for you, and the Kingdom of heaven has drawn near. That can be a one-off moment, a date marked on the calendar when you became a Christian - but it is also a continuous activity, that we may repeat many times each day, when we continually repent of wrongdoing, when we continually struggle to believe. And, as we do, the Kingdom of heaven is fulfilled in us as we enter more deeply into the eternal truth of God.

So having proclaimed the essence of this eternal encounter, Jesus is now in a position to make approaches to individuals and ask them to live out that call in their own lives. And so we see this first such encounter, in verse 18, with Simon and Andrew and then, in verse 21, with James and John.

In Matthew’s account of the call of the first disciples, we don’t really learn anything about these four men except that they are fishermen by trade. The social background of these four men is not important. All we see is four men being taken away from their personal and professional lives in response to the call of Jesus upon them.

And what are they called to? Jesus uses a really odd metaphor here! “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” The older versions of the Bible have it as “I will make you fishers of men”.

We are so used to this phrase, we don’t even think of it as a bit odd, but actually, I think it is…

There is a similar passage in Jeremiah 16:16 – “I am now sending for many fishermen, says the Lord, and they shall catch them”. But in that context, the fishermen are invading armies who will fish for the unfaithful people of Israel and destroy them!

And secondly, what happens to a fish when it is caught? It dies! Does our fishing for people result in their spiritual death? Is the church full of spiritually dead people?

And thirdly, a fish doesn’t want to be caught and is pulled on board the boat unwillingly. So are we to force people into church and force them into a relationship with God through which they will only encounter spiritual death?

When you break this metaphor down, it really is a bit odd and doesn’t really seem to speak of kindness and compassion in evangelism and mission! So let’s try and get below the skin of this call

and try to read it with fresh eyes and without all the preconceptions that we bring to it about evangelism and mission. If we read it another way, I think we get a better insight into what follows throughout the Gospel stories.

These first disciples would probably have heard of Jesus: he was, after all, walking round Galilee proclaiming the kingdom of God and as Galilean fishermen, they would probably have either seen him action or at the very least have heard about him. Galilee was a small place and, undoubtedly, Jesus was making a name for himself, so it is very likely that these fishermen would have been aware of him.

They would also, perhaps, have heard of John the Baptist’s proclamation that Jesus was mightier than he was.

And, as good Jews, they would probably have been aware of the Jeremiah 16:16 verse where spiritual fishing meant overcoming God’s enemies.

So what would have been going through their heads when they decided to leave all behind and follow this new, radical teacher who had come back to Galilee from out of the wilderness?

Power and authority.

These fishermen were powerless men, fairly poor men, looking forward only to a life of daily grind to earn a living under the regime of the Roman Empire. These fishermen weren’t part of the social elite. They weren’t the movers and shakers in society who were able to exercise political power. They weren’t the type of people who had any authority in society whatsoever. And here was a man in their midst, a man declared by John as a mighty judge, now using a phrase that seems to indicate that those who follow him will share in his power and authority and right to judge others.

What an attractive proposition for these powerless fishermen who were grinding out a living under Roman occupation. Perhaps Peter and Andrew, James and John fundamentally misunderstood the call of Jesus. Perhaps they heard it in a completely different way than we read it in today. Perhaps they heard this, in the light of Jeremiah’s prophecy and John the Baptist’s ministry, as a call to a share in authority and believed it to be the way out of their poverty and powerlessness. Here was a call to a new life in which they would have power and authority and would be respected by everyone as a result.

They didn’t really know who Jesus was, and they didn’t understand the implications of his ministry, but they had a hunch that following him would be the way for them to achieve power, authority, glory and respect. And, of course, that was a fundamental misunderstanding that stayed with them throughout the rest of their time with Jesus, as recorded in the Gospels: fighting over who would be sitting on Jesus’ left and right in heaven; refusing to serve others but wanting to be served; not understanding that they had to die in order to live; shooing away the children from Jesus so they could have more time with him; enjoying the entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday; rejoicing at the turning over of the tables in the Temple…and then being utterly distraught at the crucifixion; running away from the authorities; refusing to stand with Jesus in his hour of need; going back to their fishing boats after the crucifixion.

Peter and Andrew, James and John were called by Jesus to fish for people and the ambiguity of that phrase led them to fundamentally misunderstand their call and that resulted in the spiritual struggles that they had to work through over the coming years.

I think we need to redeem this passage for what it is rather than just see in it a simplistic call to mission and evangelism, which is what we have turned it into in the modern-day church.

The call of Jesus on our lives is completely counter-cultural; it goes completely against our expectations of what it should be, it turns our whole world on its head. Following Jesus does not take us where we expect to go…

We might think that becoming a Christian or coming to church will result in one way of living, but when we truly give our lives over to Jesus, things often take a different turn altogether.

I don’t think it would be too much to say that there is a certain shock and emotional violence attached to Christian living; something that we see in the lives of so many biblical characters. Jesus is driven out into the wilderness, where he has to encounter emptiness and solitude caught in a space between the beasts and the angels. John the Baptist is violently taken out of the story, first imprisoned and then beheaded, so that Jesus can announce a moment of crisis for each one of us as we have to choose to engage with this moment of fulfilment in our lives that will ultimately turn our world upside down. Heaven and earth unite in the person of Jesus Christ. The heavens are ripped apart in a most unexpected way, just as the curtain in the temple will apart in the most unexpected way a few years later. And the same is true of the disciples, these first four fishermen, who started to follow Jesus because it would give them a share of power and authority.

But power and authority in the Christian life are never on the agenda. Of course, we all want to experience power and authority and be respected for who we are - but we will be taken the way of the cross instead and will be called to die in order to live.

Jesus said, “Follow me, and I will help you fish for people”. The church throughout history has taken this as a call to mission and evangelism - and so it is. But underlying it is the personal challenge that all of us face when we become Christians that Jesus will take us in a direction that we least expect.

This part of Matthew’s Gospel should leave us feeling a little uncomfortable about what it means to be a Christian. We are not called to an easy life, we are not called to power and authority - but to a tough life that will constantly surprise us and challenge us. Jesus constantly calls his disciples, constantly calls each one of us, to a new way of living - and the disciples constantly misunderstand what that means for themselves and perhaps we can be a bit guilty of the same misunderstanding.

And so we are called to constantly assess why we are followers of Christ and what it is that we want to get out of this lifestyle we have chosen…

Are we seeking honour and glory and power and authority and respect? Or are we prepared to walk the way of the cross and all that this will mean for us in our everyday lives?