

## **INTRODUCTION: INVITATIONS**

If you were minding your own business, whatever that business was, and a total stranger popped up and said, "Follow me!", would you?

If you were minding your own business, and that business happened to be fishing, and this stranger said, "Leave all that behind now: come on a road trip with me?" would you go?

I wouldn't.

And I don't actually think that's what the disciples did either. Let me explain.

### **1. JESUS' CALL: DIDN'T WE DO THIS LAST WEEK?**

If you were here last week, you might recall the gospel reading was from John 1, about Jesus meeting John, Andrew, Simon Peter, and others who would become his followers. When they asked him questions about himself, he told them, and I used this phrase as the heart of last week's sermon, "Come and see."

At first glance it might look like we've got the same again this week, but with Matthew having a different version of the story: Jesus is walking by the Sea of Galilee, sees these people, and calls them to follow him.

So you might have two questions: why are we getting the same story two weeks' running, and can we trust the gospels if they can't even agree on this?!

But I don't think this is the same story, and I think that is significant for the question how people might come to hear the call of Jesus today and follow him. I preached about last week; this week is Part 2 of that sermon.

## **2. JESUS' CALL: THEN**

First, I don't think this is the same story.

We were told by John that Jesus met John, Andrew and Simon Peter the day after he was baptised by John the Baptist. But Matthew says today's events happened after John had been arrested; some time has passed – weeks, maybe months. Jesus has moved to Galilee. If so, when Jesus walks down the shoreline on this day, he sees people he's met before, and talked with – Andrew, Simon Peter, James and John.

I can't prove that, but it makes sense. Go with it for now, and it may change the picture we often have of how Jesus' call worked: we may imagine he saw total strangers, told them to drop everything and – miraculously – they did.

Maybe not. We wouldn't generally accept invitations from total strangers even for a cup of tea, let alone on a lifelong journey.

Maybe here Jesus met people, and asked them to come and see what he was all about. They hung out. They talked, went for a walk, argued. That was last week's gospel. Perhaps later, this week's gospel story, when they knew him, trusted him, understood something of what he was about, he challenged them: "You know me now; so, come on, follow me."

It would make sense if that's how it was.

And today, I think we'll need to follow that example if people who do not believe are going to.

We talked last week about the decline not only of the numbers of those who believe in Christ, but also of the main path that led people to faith, which is from the cradle onwards. For most of us, "Come and see" happened in our childhood and youth; for most people today, that's not happening.

### **3. JESUS' CALL: US**

So if we want to help other people discover the faith that matters so much to us that – for example – we bother with church at all, what would all this mean for us?

Well, it says this is unlikely to be an instant thing.

I mentioned baptisms last week, that it's good to welcome people when they want their children baptised. It's also good to welcome those who want to marry, and to care for the bereaved at funerals. But we can also feel disappointed that few of those who come for such an occasion ... come back much, or remain. At its worst, especially after baptisms, church members can feel a bit used: you can, can't you? Feeling: why do you only want something *from* the church, not to carry on belonging *to* it? It's understandable, but of course what people are looking for at that moment doesn't necessarily match what we as believers hope baptism ought to be about. It's tricky, this, but that's the way it is!

But we really aren't likely to see many people come to church for one occasion, whatever that may be, and have an experience like Paul on the road to Damascus, when a blinding light leads him to see. Well, actually it led him to be blind, and then, after some days, and with the help of a brave believer, to

come to see – literally and spiritually: interesting, that even Damascus Road experiences might not be quite as instant as the very term has come to mean.

We might hope people will come to a church service, and hear Jesus say, “Follow me”, and do it. I don’t think it’ll often work that way, because the “Come and see” stage has not happened first.

And some of the “Come and see” may not look very religious at all, and probably needs not to. Interesting that Jesus didn’t ask his would-be disciples to come to synagogue with him. He had them round to his house; it wasn’t all religion – he befriended them.

So spaces to actually talk in our church are so important. There’s lots of that at Messy Church. And did you ever think that having coffee after this service was a nice but really optional extra? Not in my mind: it’s an absolutely essential part of our gathering and our ability to welcome.

My own story is that I did come to faith in my youth. But not through the church. I’d been to church and Sunday School as a small child, and I was bored, didn’t like it, stopped going. But I was invited to come to a Sunday afternoon group called Crusaders. I wouldn’t have gone if my cousin hadn’t been part of it. And I wouldn’t have kept going if I’d not made friends, but I did. And we did at least as much playing games as reading the Bible. There was a great deal of “Come and see” alongside an clear and exciting explanation of what Jesus’ call to “Follow me” meant. When some of us then actually tried as teenagers to go to church – we now believed, and thought we ought to belong to a church – well, we had real trouble making any sense of it, and we were already on board!!

I had years of that good, fun, *Come and see* phase to help me decide to answer the call *Follow me*.

#### **4. COME AND SEE ... FOLLOW ME – BELONG, BELIEVE, BEHAVE**

And it seems likely that if people are going to be led to Christian faith in our time, we'll have to make it possible to do lots of "Come and see" before we can expect "Follow me" to be heard.

People who study these things have noted that it is now very important for anyone who is going to make a journey of faith to feel like they *belong*. It's often put like this. We might assume that believing is something we do first, and that might lead us to change and become the sort of person who wants to go to church (whatever that is!). This can be summarised as:

*Believe, behave, belong.*

Very logical ... and not how it works at all. No. People need to hang around others who do believe, and see if it looks like it works for *them*, does them some good, and if they do some good too as a result. And they need the confidence that they are accepted and cared for before they are really very interested at all in what Christians say. So the church door needs to be wide open, and its walls thin. People need to be genuinely welcomed, valued and become part of what goes on. Then they might come to faith, and see it affect their lives too. So it actually works:

*Belong, believe, behave.*

"Come and see" must precede "follow me".

I do think this means friendship is hugely important. First, being friends here, a real community, who – in spite of ups and downs and sometimes disagreeing with each other – do what Jesus said, which is love each other and wash each others' feet. Not literally, except on Maundy Thursday, but help and serve one another. That creates a fishing net which other people might be willing to be caught up in too. Vital.

And also our own friendships. Who are the people who might be willing to come and see about Jesus? People who trust us, and like us. If we invite complete strangers to things to do with God, why should they come?! But if we can open up the welcome of our church family to other people we know well, they might get caught in its net, like we have.

I asked myself as I wrote this sermon, "Rick, do you pray for your friends who don't have faith – not just in general, but that they might become followers of Jesus too?"

Well, not very often, if I'm honest.

Well why ever not? There's nothing I'd like more than people I care about coming to share the thing that – underneath it all – is most important to me. I want them to be Arsenal fans too. No, I mean faith!

Do you pray for your friends and family, specifically that they might grow to share the faith you enjoy? Do you want that for them?

## **CONCLUSION: FOLLOWERS**

Now this all assumes that we have a role in all this, which may come as a shock. But Jesus does not seem to call anyone to be

a passive believer, “Here have this precious gift for yourself, but it’s not your job to help anyone else get it.”

Ummm ... no; we all know he said the opposite: “Tell other people about me too.”

Sunday school child – what to sing – one boy vicious old men song ... don’t know that, how does it go.

*I will make you vicious old men, vicious old men ...*

He needed it explained that it was actually I will make you fishers of men, if you follow me.

And this is what Jesus said: “Follow me, and you will become churchgoers.” Nope: “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people.”

Well, that fishing is not straightforward in a society that used to be more Christian and thinks it doesn’t want Jesus. It’s hard. It cannot be done with any sense of superiority, or any tone of people “ought” to be Christian. That feels to those around like being vicious, actually.

But it can be done with a good net, which we together can make; it can be done if we make it possible for there to be plenty of “Come and see”, so that, in time “Follow me” becomes possible. People still do make that choice, and still will, if we are willing to let ourselves together be fishers of people, with Jesus.