

Chichester Cathedral

The Fourth Sunday before Lent, 11.00am Sung Eucharist, 10 February 2019

‘When they had brought their boats to shore, they *left everything* and followed Jesus.’

Many people have asked me how the packing is going. My reply has been that we haven’t started yet – but what we have been doing is ‘decluttering’, with many trips to charity shops and the recycling bins. And I have to confess that a key guide in this has been the Japanese author, speaker and ‘decluttering expert’, Marie Kondo. Not her much discussed Netflix television series, but her first book: *The life changing magic of tidying*. A later book has her catchphrase as its title: *Spark Joy*. Here’s a quotation: ‘Keep only those things that speak to the heart, and discard items that no longer spark joy. Thank them for their service – then let them go.’

Perhaps by this point you are thinking that eleven years at the Cathedral have made me soft in the head. So perhaps I should make it clear that there are many aspects of the Kondo approach I don’t go for, not least her contention that ‘no household needs more than thirty books’! And certainly not her sense that physical objects have ‘spirits’ and should be treated almost as living beings.

Nonetheless there is something of the rigour of the Gospel in Kondo’s challenge to the families she works with: ‘there are three approaches we can take toward our possessions: face them now, face them sometime, or avoid them until the day we die.’ It’s a stark message, but the popularity of Kondo’s approach indicates it resonates with many people, who feel their lives are too full of clutter, they are overwhelmed by ‘stuff’, and, above all, they would like to experience more joy.

But perhaps Marie Kondo does not go far enough? After all, one of three key themes that can be drawn from today’s Gospel reading has to do with the use of possessions. The story ends with the dramatic and abrupt note that ‘When they had brought their boats to shore, they left *everything* and followed Jesus.’ In view of the huge number of fish included in that ‘everything’, within a few days it may have got rather smelly on that bit of Lake Gennesaret. But this is not the focus in Luke’s Gospel: what is depicted here is a radical unconcern for possessions that is integrally connected with discipleship, that is, with following Jesus.

Later, at the beginning of the *Acts of the Apostles*, Luke will tell of the early church’s practice of sharing possessions with one another, of the selling of property, and the distribution of food to widows. Today he portrays Simon and those with him leaving their boats, their workers, and their astonishing catch, to go after someone they only dimly comprehend, on a mission they do not fully understand. Whoever Jesus is, however, and wherever he leads, it seems he is able to inspire the casting aside of possessions and career.

While there are few who can meet this challenge in full, all of us can acknowledge that many of the things we hang on to, from physical possessions to embedded habits

and assumptions, can hold us back, and unhelpfully dominate our lives. Leaving us wondering where we might find true, deep, lasting satisfaction – and indeed where we might find joy.

Three chapters earlier in Luke's Gospel, there is a pretty clear answer to this question. I refer to the part of the Christmas story where an angel appears to shepherds and tells them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.' Here we learn that the ultimate source of joy is not something, but someone – the creator of joy himself, born in a Bethlehem stable, later to grow into the one who, as in today's Gospel, has more words about not being afraid, for 'from now you will be catching people'.

Earlier I mentioned three key themes in our Lukan reading, beginning with the use of possessions. The second is what I have just been speaking about: the presence of God. Think of Simon's striking response to the unexpected filling of the fishermen's nets, once they have followed Jesus' instructions: 'Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man!' Rather than start a debate about who Jesus is, and how he could possibly have known the location of the fish, he recognizes that the source of Jesus' authority is the very authority of God, and he responds with awe. Peter is not confessing any particular sins; his is simply acknowledging the frailty of his humanity in relation to the divine presence. Like Isaiah in our first reading this morning, he knows the fear of God: 'I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!'

This theme of unworthiness in God's presence unites all our readings today. We have spoken of Peter and Isaiah, and in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, he recalls his encounter with the risen Christ, which produced in him the sense that he was 'the least of the apostles, unfit to *be* an apostle.' But, he goes on, 'by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace towards me has not been in vain.' As Paul asserts, for all the sense of unworthiness he shares with Isaiah and Peter, God does not encounter human beings in order to condemn, but rather to call and transform: 'his grace towards me has not been in vain'. Paul becomes a powerful proclaimer of the Gospel among the Gentiles, Isaiah is emboldened and sent out with a word for God's people, and Peter is invited to leave fear behind in order that he might 'catch people'; that is, invite others to find the true meaning of *their* lives in following Jesus Christ.

A contemporary example of 'by the grace of God I am what I am' is found in the life of the current Archbishop of Canterbury. You may recall Archbishop Justin's reaction, when a couple of years ago he was startled to discover that the man he had always believed to be his father, was not so. The Archbishop recalled that his early life had been messy, as had the younger lives of both the man he assumed to be his father, and his mother, because of their addiction to alcohol. And then, sixty years after his birth, a DNA test revealed that Archbishop Justin's biological father was in fact a private secretary to Winston Churchill. His dignified and thoughtful response to this unexpected news was as follows: 'I know that I find who I am in Jesus Christ,

not in genetics, and my identity in him never changes...’. This is an affirmation that Peter and Paul would both have recognized and applauded.

I said earlier that many of the things we hang on to, from physical possessions to embedded habits and assumptions, can hold us back and dominate our lives. We learn from the Archbishop’s story that alcoholism is but one example of many possible destructive habits, and the notion that we are wholly determined by our family background, but one example of a false assumption. And that it is in encountering the grace of God, that true identity is to be found.

Martin Laird, a monk and academic, has just published a book called *An Ocean of Light – Contemplation, Transformation, and Liberation*. In it he uses ‘decluttering’ as a metaphor for contemplative prayer. The object of such prayer, he writes, is not to achieve some new competency or objective, but rather to clear away accumulated mental junk. And so to come to realise that because God has made us, we are already united with him. It is all the other stuff in our lives that keeps us from realising this.

So perhaps, yes, Marie Kondo is right, but does not go far enough. Dealing creatively with the physical possessions in our lives is a necessary step on the way to joy, but not the only one. To give her credit, she does recognise that the way we can be possessed by our possessions *is* a spiritual issue. But ultimately, although there may be things in our homes of deep emotional significance that do indeed ‘spark joy’, the real point is to discover the true source of joy itself.

You may recall that I mentioned three themes in today’s Gospel, but have so far mentioned only two: the use of possessions, and the presence of God. The third is abundance, even superabundance. It is seen here in that huge catch of fish, an anticipation of the role Peter will play in the Acts of Apostles, where his preaching on the day of Pentecost will not only ‘catch people’, but astonishingly large numbers of them. And of course all the Gospels associate Jesus with abundance, from overflowing wine at a wedding, to baskets of leftovers after thousands have been fed.

It seems that ‘leaving everything’ in following Jesus does not mean a grim, constrained existence; quite the reverse! It rather means discovering that true abundance is not about the number of things you own, but about the amount of love, compassion, mercy, imagination, generosity and joy. By the grace of God, there need never be a shortage of these, whatever one’s material circumstances.

For me, I am deeply grateful for the abundance of kindness, dedication, talent, friendship, holiness, and joyfulness I have found in my years at the Cathedral. I go to Portsmouth with a deep sense of thankfulness for all I have received here. And I pray that we may all may be *people* who ‘spark joy’ in the world, who point others towards the true source of joy, and who recognize that joy is a fruit of the Holy Spirit – an outworking of God at work in us. AMEN

Canon Dr Anthony Cane, *Chancellor*