

## Epiphany 2 Mattins 2020 (19.02.2019) The Precentor

A retired missionary once bequeathed to me an unusual little book. It consists of a series of drawings of scenes from the gospels set in China. Peter and Andrew are pictured as Asian men, fishing from a sampan, with bamboo plants growing on the shoreline. Jesus is also portrayed with Chinese features and clothes. These drawings came out of China in the 1930's, an attempt by local artists to convey who Jesus is in the vernacular. But whilst artists have throughout history transposed the outward things of Jesus' ministry from a Middle-Eastern location to a European or Asian culture the *inner* characteristics of our Lord remain unchanged.

And one of those inward characteristics is that, like his heavenly Father, Jesus makes promises. In the early chapters of Genesis, we hear God making a promise to Noah that he would never flood the earth again. In a later chapter God promised Abraham descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven. And then in the book of Exodus we hear a promise of deliverance for his people enslaved in Egypt. And in this morning's Gospel reading Jesus, filled with this divine DNA, makes a promise to Peter, Andrew, James and John: "I will make you into fishers of people." (JB). It's a promise that

mirrors the creative work of God in the OT; for the verb “to make” which is on the lips of Jesus here is the same word used to describe the creation of humankind. And the good news in this promise of Jesus is that there is no reservation or caveat; the commitment by Jesus to make the disciples fishers of people is not dependent on their abilities but on the faithfulness of Jesus to his word.

If we then return to today’s passage, we hear how the disciples responded to this promise to make them into fishers of people. We are told they followed Jesus immediately and wholeheartedly – they left everything and committed themselves to him. It’s a response that the church has formalised in the promises we make at baptism when we say: “I turn to Christ”; “I submit to Christ as Lord; I come to Christ the way, the truth and the life.” We have simply put into words what the first disciples implicitly promised by their actions. And this ability to commit ourselves and make promises is something uniquely human. G.K. Chesterton once said: “The vow is to the human being what the song is to the bird or the bark is to the dog”. What he meant was that the capacity to make vows and promises is something that defines our species because it shows our dignity as people who are made in the image of the God who promises. Animals may be loyal, but

they lack this ability, that is common to God and humanity, to commit and make promises.

So, the gospel of Mark begins with this outpouring of energy and hope. Jesus calls and the disciples respond. Jesus makes a promise and the disciples commit themselves in return. There is an immediacy and an excitement to all that is happening. But as the gospel unfolds Mark shines the hard light of truth on the disciples. He shows them being slow to understand; he reveals their mixed motives and personal ambitions; and by the time we reach the end of the gospel all those initial promises to follow Jesus, however implicit, start to fall apart.

The disintegration really becomes obvious in the Garden of Gethsemane. As officials come to arrest Jesus and take him away for interrogation Mark tells us that the disciples all “deserted him and fled”; Jesus is abandoned not followed. Yet there is still one more twist of this particular knife to come. When Peter, standing later by a charcoal fire, is recognized by a serving girl and accused of being with Jesus Peter does more than distance himself from his Lord – his denial of Jesus is as if the relationship had never been. Jesus is not just abandoned but completely rejected by Peter. So, Mark’s gospel leaves us

with a fairly bleak view of human discipleship and our inability to live up to our promises and commitments.

But I began by saying that Jesus puts no reservation or caveat on his promises – his promises are not dependent on human ability but on his grace. To see the truth of this, though, we have to turn to the fourth gospel. After the resurrection Jesus speaks to Peter by a charcoal fire which must have brought back all the memories of his denial and rejection of Jesus. And Jesus calls him a second time and says: “Follow me”. So often in Christian discipleship there is more than one call from the Lord. Perhaps, as with Peter, a second call comes following a time of testing and apparent failure. But, out of what seems to be a negative experience we learn that following Jesus is not about our own ability or strength. Jesus uses setbacks to divert us from a shallow self-confidence to depend instead on the promise and grace of Jesus.

So, the fourth gospel gives us the hope that is perhaps not quite so obvious in Mark’s writing. The promise of Jesus: “I will make you fishers of people” is fulfilled. For our part we have to keep on putting ourselves into his presence so that we recognize his unflinching faithfulness to us in darkness and in light; in sorrow and in joy.