

**Sermon 26 January 2020**  
**Isaiah 9:1-4**  
**1 Cor 1:10-18**  
**Matthew 4: 12-23**

Someone I know recently circulated an interesting YouTube video on Facebook about the widespread nature of loneliness and its biological impact on our health. The video started by explaining that although we all feel lonely from time to time, for a number of people over the past few decades chronic loneliness has grown considerably.

The video goes on to explain that feeling lonely is a biological phenomenon leading us to pay attention to our social needs. For thousands of years human beings needed to be socially engaged with others in order to stay alive. You literally couldn't survive as an isolated individual. We evolved to live as part of a social group consisting of around 50-100 people but for a variety of reasons most of us no longer live like this. Many of us live at some distance from family and close friends who we rarely see.

Nonetheless our bodies and minds are still essentially the same as they were thousands of years ago and we are hard-wired to be with others. Loneliness is apparently twice as bad for our health as obesity and as bad as smoking the equivalent as a packet of cigarettes every day. It encourages those watching the video to reach out to others in an attempt to fight back against the isolation characteristic of much contemporary life.

In this morning's Gospel reading we see Jesus reaching out to others. After his baptism and temptation in the wilderness the first thing Jesus does, right at the start of his ministry, is to gather a group of people around him. I think we can see this as an expression not merely of Jesus' pragmatism but also of his humanity. It is easy for us to think of Jesus as all sufficient and as needing no one else.

He does, of course, regularly take himself off to pray to his heavenly Father, but I would argue that he also demonstrates a profound need for others; for social interaction and team-work. Throughout the gospels he demonstrates that he enjoys the company of others and envisages this 'being with others' as central to the Gospel; a demonstration of the Kingdom of Heaven that he proclaims.

In this morning's passage Matthew locates Jesus in Galilee, the area surrounding Nazareth, in the town of Capernaum where he made his home. He demonstrates to his readers that in beginning his ministry in Galilee he is fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah, which we heard as our Old Testament reading.

In this liturgical year, as we journey through Matthew's Gospel, we see the writer making a number of references to Jesus fulfilling the scriptures. He needs to reassure his Jewish audience that Jesus is the one that they are expecting – the one who will bring great light to those sitting in darkness. It is here on the Sea of Galilee that he meets the first four of his 12 Apostles – two sets of

brothers - Simon Peter and Andrew who are fishing together and James and John who are mending their nets.

The calling is abrupt; Jesus says to them 'Follow me' and they drop what they are doing and follow him just like that. And so we see a pattern developing in which 'Jesus calls and people jump'. The response of these first disciples illustrates Jesus' authority as well as the importance of his mission. Clearly there is something about his call that is irresistible to those who have been waiting for the messiah.

So here, right at the start of his ministry we see Jesus surrounding himself with followers or disciples who will in turn help to recruit more followers. Jesus doesn't say 'come with me and I will teach you how to lead better lives' but 'Follow me and I will make you fish for people' – 'Join me and draw more people in'.

The Gospels abound with stories in which Jesus is surrounded by people; teaching them and healing them but also eating with them – sharing bread with them. He eats with prostitutes, tax collectors and other sinners; he miraculously provides food for the thousands he preaches to; he shares supper with his Apostles on the night before he dies and after his resurrection he eats a meal with some disciples at Emmaus and with his Apostles on the shore by Galilee.

After his Ascension the practice of eating together remained central to the gatherings of his followers and some of the earliest Eucharistic liturgies focus on the image of gathering God's people

in to the Kingdom of Heaven – ‘As this broken bread was scattered upon the mountains and having been gathered together became one, so may your church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into your kingdom.’

The Kingdom of Heaven is where we are with others in the fullest sense and where loneliness, isolation and exclusion are entirely alien. We perhaps focus on being in the presence of God at the expense of a ‘being with others’ – both are crucial to Jesus’ understanding of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Our reading from Corinthians also touches on the togetherness that we are called to in Christ. It is easy to think that schism is only a characteristic of the modern Church - but in our reading we see that faction and disagreement were present from the onset. Paul here and elsewhere calls for unity. He urges the Corinthians to be ‘united in the same mind and purpose’.

Later on in the letter he explains that this mind is to be the ‘mind of Christ’. He also uses the well-known image of the Church as the Body of Christ with each member having a valuable role to play and Christ at its head. He calls his fellow Christians ‘brothers and sisters’ to indicate the sort of relationship we are to have with one another.

We are living in an age of loneliness and isolation. This is bad for our health or at the very least inhibits our enjoyment of life. The Gospel proclaims the Kingdom of God – the Kingdom of Heaven. As well as preaching about the Kingdom, Jesus embodied it. One

of the ways in which he did this was to surround himself with others who would in turn draw others in or 'fish for people'.

These images are central to the Church's expression of faith as it baptizes new members into the Body of Christ and prays for God to gather its members into one body at the Eucharist. As human beings and as Christians our experience is collective. This is at the heart of the Gospel. So let us as Christians challenge the ever-encroaching culture of loneliness and isolation and draw others in.