

Sermon preached at the Women's Auxiliary Bishop Day Service held in the Church of the Conversion of St Paul, Portmore, on January 6, 2018

Let us pray.

O God of grace, who at this time gave Jesus Christ to be our Saviour: We beseech you to overcome our darkness with his light, our selfishness with his love, our indolence and cowardice with his steadfast devotion, that we may live ever as in your presence, and perform faithfully our appointed tasks, and finally come to everlasting life; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Once again we have come together on this feast of the Epiphany, to participate in the annual pilgrimage of the Women's Auxiliary, when, after a year of praying, planning, and much activity, the members come together to share in worship and to present their gifts for the Diocesan Pastoral Aid Fund. Today, we meet in a congregation which has been the recipient of the charitable work on your part in supporting the ministry and mission of the Church, and which has in turn been empowered to become one of the newest members of the Auxillary, and now the host of today's activities. And so I want us to offer our congratulations and affirmation of this new kid on the block who is becoming a shining star.

We must once again acknowledge the commitment and effort on your part during the past year in raising the funds which you will contribute today. Consequently, the gifts which are being offered are an expression of the fulfillment of the motto of the Women's Auxiliary – **Worship, Work and Witness**.

We are meeting on this the Feast of the Epiphany with its own multiple possibilities in terms of themes for a sermon. I would, however, want to focus on the theme of discipleship as we have embarked on a **season of intentional discipleship** within this diocese, in conjunction with the Province and the entire Anglican Communion. Furthermore, your motto – Worship, Work and Witness - are not just expression of functions or duties but, must arise out of your own sense of being and identity as disciples of Jesus Christ.

One way in which to begin this exploration of the theme is to focus on some of those moments in the life of Jesus when he called persons to discipleship with the invitation, "Follow me", and which appear in a number of different contexts within the gospels, but my focus will be on those within the gospel of St. Mark. Accordingly, I want to begin the exploration in the first chapter of Mark's gospel – Mark 1:17-18.

Mark 1:17-18

And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And immediately they left their nets and followed him.

According to St. Mark's construction, Jesus had just begun his public ministry, having been baptized by John the Baptist and then going off into the wilderness. As the wilderness was associated with a place of deep spiritual experience and communion with God, we can assume that this was a time of preparation for his ministry through communing with God the Father. With the arrest of John and his departure from the scene, Jesus now enters the picture with a proclamation:

The time is fulfilled; and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the gospel. (verse 15)

This proclamation signaled the fact that God was now at work in a new and profound way in the life of the people, bringing to pass the fulfillment of their long awaited dream of the obvious reign and rule of God in the world in a messianic figure. This rule of God was now to be obvious, not just to the Jewish community of faith but to the world at large. In preparation for this, however, the people had been challenged to make profound changes in their life. They would have to make a right about turn. This transformation was not going to be the result of their effort/work but by the activity of God through faith in him. They were being called upon to give up the old ways (repent), and to become focused on and attached to the gospel through faith, and so allow God to do His work in them.

Against the background of this message, Jesus then goes on to engage/confront specific persons with the good news of the gospel and the invitation to discipleship. And so he approaches the first two persons he wanted to be in a special relationship with him, Simon Peter and Andrew. They were about their daily business and routine of catching fish when he issued a call to them. They were Jewish men so they would have shared the same religious tradition of Jesus and would have been a part of a community of faith that was looking forward to the coming of God's kingdom and rule through the coming of the expected messiah. So, we need not believe that Jesus just said, "come" and, not having met him or heard of him, and the message that he was proclaiming, that they came. He called them against the background of the message which we saw him proclaiming in verse 15 – God is doing a new and profound thing, repent and believe. The call to these two men is then a call to make that response for themselves first of all, and then to come and participate in bringing others to this point also – “fish for men”. In some ways these two were like many of us Anglicans who have been in church for years, sitting behind a column where we hope too many persons won't notice us, we throw a little collection here and there, and then we leave church as quickly as it is over, or even before the end of service, so that we can get on with life without having any deeper commitment being asked of us. So they needed to move to another level and repent and believe in order to respond to the call of Jesus Christ, and then to bring others to the same point. A true sign of commitment was to be a movement from hiding behind the crowd or giving a passing nod to the idea of repentance and discipleship, to one that would be obvious and true.

But the response to the call did not come easy. The call of Jesus to these men did not begin as a call to personal piety, the experience of emotional high experiences, or with the assurance of personal consolation and salvation in which they could somehow just revel. They are called to a relationship/journey, out of which would arise a mission. Later in chapter 2 of Mark's gospel Jesus calls Levi, the tax collector, and all he says to him is “Follow me”. It is only when we get to chapter 3

when he appoints the full complement of the Twelve that we see a further clarification of what following Jesus involves. So, there we are told that:

¹³ Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him. ¹⁴ He appointed twelve^[a] that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach ¹⁵ and to have authority to drive out demons.

What then can we say about the Call of Jesus to these men?

1. It is a call first of all to be with him, to learn from him, to learn what it is to live 'Jesus shaped lives' and, arising out of that process of engagement, to become a participant in the mission of God to the world which was now taking on a new expression in the ministry of Jesus.

For those whom we have seen responding to the invitation to follow Jesus in the text, something about the person of Jesus no doubt made all the difference in their response to the call to discipleship and which sustained their relationship with him. No doubt, it was this relationship which kept them faithful to Jesus and to his call to discipleship for the rest of his life, and subsequently theirs.

One of my concerns about the Christian community is the extent to which we have experienced the call of God in Jesus Christ and have a living and vibrant personal relationship with him. We will never have any sense of call until we experience the living God who, in Jesus Christ is at work in our lives and who engages us personally. Do you know God? Can you offer any kind of testimony as to who God is and how you have experienced him in your life? An impersonal and distant God always stays out there where we keep him at arm's length. Look at the significant accounts of the call of persons in the Bible, look at the relationship between the individuals and God who calls and those who are called – Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah – and here in the text as Jesus calls. None of these persons was a 'holy' person, and therefore, the kind of person whom God was supposed to call, but when God called they entered into a relationship which was deep and at times conflict laden, but they could do it because they knew first-hand the God to whom they were relating and who had called them. There is a Collect which is said at Morning Prayer which speaks to this enduring nature of one's relationship with God in Christ – Grant, Lord, that we may be faithful to you without turning aside, worship you without growing weary, serve you without failing; diligently seek you, happily find you, and forever possess you, the one and only God, blessed, for ever and ever. Amen.

Do you know God in Christ and walk as a disciple in these terms? If you do not want to share a relationship with him then, you will walk away from him like the rich young ruler who was not prepared to give up life as he knew it, and then there will be a rejection of the call. Remember it was **not only** the Twelve that Jesus called, as there were some who had excuses why they could not come.

There are many religious traditions which have at the centre of their life and devotion, the worship or imitation of a founder/exemplar, whose life and demands on the faithful, place on the faithful an oppressive and impossible icon to emulate. Christian discipleship is of a different nature. Christian discipleship may be seen to be grounded in and enabled by one of those terms which St. Paul has contributed to Christian Scripture, and hence to the Church, namely, "Christ in me". Seen in this light, in Christian discipleship "Christ in me" becomes the enabler of faithful

discipleship, rather than my personal effort or the imitation of an exemplar whose shoes I can never fill.

There is a reflection offered by James Stewart in a work entitled *A Man in Christ*, which seeks to develop this idea of Christ in me further.

"Christ in me" means something quite different from the weight of an impossible ideal, something far more glorious than the oppression of a pattern for ever beyond all imitation. "Christ in me" means Christ bearing me along from within, Christ the motive-power that carries me on, Christ giving my whole life a wonderful poise and lift, and turning every burden into wings. All this is in it when the apostle speaks of "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col. 1:27). Compared with this, the religion which bases everything on example is pitifully rudimentary. This, and this alone, is the true Christian religion. Call it mysticism or not—the name matters little: the thing, the experience, matters everything. To be "in Christ," to have Christ within, to realize your creed not as something you have to bear but as something by which you are borne, this is Christianity. It is more: it is release and liberty, life with an endless song at its heart. It means feeling within you, as long as life here lasts, the carrying power of Love Almighty; and underneath you, when you come to die, the touch of everlasting arms.

At the same time, while the Christian needs to have an understanding of what it is to be "in Christ" there must also be an appropriation of the obligations and responsibilities which follow from this. Accordingly, the great spiritual director and theologian, James C. Fenhagen, in his work *Mutual Ministry* has this to say about discipleship:

To become a disciple means to see for oneself the values that energized the life of Jesus of Nazareth, to struggle with them, until there comes that moment when by the grace of God they become our own. Commitment to an ongoing and disciplined enrichment of our relationship to God, the affirmation of human need and worth in the face of the demonic pretensions of those principalities and powers that control our lives, the desire to serve life out of love rather than power or reward, and a deep identification with the poor and the hungry and the oppressed; these are values that we can see in the *life* of Jesus. They are values which when affirmed and lived will make a profound difference in the quality of life of the world that is emerging. It is through psychic and spiritual intercourse with values such as these that we are called to be value bearers in the name of Christ.

All I need to add to this at this point is that this is what is meant by living a Jesus-shaped life.

2. Acceptance of the call to discipleship would inevitably lead to a redefinition of the nature of God, God's mission, and a broadening of their understanding of the boundaries of God's saving work, to include not just Jews, but gentiles also, an inclusive mission. To that extent, they would learn

also that the call to participate in God's mission includes and embraces those who were not understood to be a part of the community of faith, spoken of in the Scriptures as those of the "world", those who in our context today we would label as "the un-churched". Archbishop Rowan Williams sums up this dimension this way:

Being where Jesus is means being in the company of the people whose company Jesus seeks and keeps. Jesus chooses the company of the excluded, the disreputable, the wretched, the self-hating, the poor, the diseased...

Furthermore, the call to discipleship is by definition a call to subject oneself to the teaching of the master through a process of ongoing relationship and patterning one's life after the master. Through that means, the disciples came to understand the call as one, not to proclamation and speech, but to make the gospel come alive in their daily living and encounter with persons. (AGP pages 234-235) Rowan Williams speaks of this as being in a state of awareness, and says further "The disciple is where he or she is in order to be changed; so that the way in which he or she sees and experiences the whole world changes."

One of the problems which we face as a diocese today is that many of us have lost sight of what it means to be a people called to mission as disciples of Jesus Christ. Many congregations are displaying little sign of active mission to those outside of their comfortable membership. The idea of reaching the un-churched hardly crosses the minds of many and is confined to having visitors stand on a Sunday morning and clapping when they stand. No one wants to go outside of the church and engage the un-churched or the lapsed with a sense of mission. Within the field of various disciplines there is what is known as "best practices" which are proven to be effective and then shared with others. Today, among many congregations across this diocese, "best practices" seem to mean copying each other in putting in ceramic tiles and multi-media screens. Sadly, these things will bring in no new members or the un-churched but, it might certainly make the mourners who come to the funerals of our fading membership feel more comfortable in our sanitized setting.

3. Throughout Mark's gospel, as the Twelve journeyed with Jesus we see them learning the lessons as to what discipleship, the call "to follow", means. One thing becomes evident along the way, and it is that responding to the Call involves making a commitment which is costly.

Far too many of us Christians have no sense of being called of God in Christ. For us it is something for the ordained or those who exercise special leadership responsibilities who are seen to have a call. Additionally, there is no sense of the radical nature of the call and the responsibility which it brings to the life of the Christian by way of attachment and detachment. Christians in today's world can talk about the evils of politicians, crime and violence, the economy, etc. just like everybody else, but when it comes to contributing those things which arise out of the Christian calling in Christ toward the shaping of society, we are silent and dumbstruck. We seem to have such a limited sense of our discipleship that we do not see how it is connected with life in the family, the workplace, the community, and in the political and social life of our nation, so we take our cue from our favourite talk-show host.

Our sense of calling as disciples of Jesus Christ resides in our incorporation into him by virtue of our baptism. So it is a matter of our identity. The call to intentional discipleship for us in our age must begin with a renewal of our baptismal covenant which we re-affirmed in Confirmation, and which we are called to constantly renew. This then becomes the basis of the energizing force in our life as individuals and as a community of faith. These are ideas which find expression in our Catechism where it speaks to the duty of all Christians.

There it speaks first of all to **personal commitment and piety** (what the text calls **consecration**); **the imperative to participate in evangelism**; and **participation of each Christian in the mission and ministry entrusted to the Church**. In practical terms it means that we must be engaged in the struggles of the life of our people and make those positive responses and contributions which reside within our capabilities. Accordingly, we must be concerned about the pervasive abuse of our children, human trafficking, poverty, unemployment, crime and violence, social injustices, the protracted delays in the delivery of justice through the courts, the plight of the disadvantaged and marginalized, corruption, the neglect of the environment, and the challenges within the educational system of the nation, to name a few.

The call to follow also has a note of urgency and often demands some sacrifices on our part. It may involve a separation, a giving up on some things that are not consistent with the call. When Jesus called the disciples they gave up the claims of family, job, and way of life. But the detachment can be at deeper and more personal levels.

Some time ago I read a book on Mahatma Gandhi, and was struck by the way in which he saw himself having a vocation from God to pursue the way of non-violence as the way to Independence and justice for the people of India, and how even in the days just before his assassination he spoke about the prospects of it happening, but that it would not deter him. I was reminded too of the parallel with the great Dr. Martin Luther King who, in one of his last great speeches about the “mountain top”, over 50 years ago, seemed to have been quite clear about the risks involved in championing the cause of civil rights for black people but, would not flinch in the face of what he understood faithfulness to Christ and the gospel demanded of him.

Jesus’ call to discipleship with the risking of one’s life and the facing of the possibility of suffering is not the most attractive one. In fact, Jesus knew fully well that the way of discipleship to which he was calling his disciples was not the way of the world. He knew fully well that the way of the world is the way of self-preservation – save yourself, save your skin, look after number 1. The world says, look after yourself, pursue and accumulate all that the world has to offer you and, at the end of the day the society will say, what a successful person he/she is. After all to do otherwise would not be pragmatic, and would be foolish, old-fashioned, or fanatical. It is much easier to go with the flow of things.

But then Jesus knew that the end of this all was a life lost. So Jesus asked the question, “What will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?” Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them will also the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.

4. But, those whom Jesus calls to discipleship, he also empowers and commissions for mission. In Mark 3:14-15 Jesus entrusted to those he called a mission which can be quite unsettling. There we are told that:

He appointed twelve of them whom He designated as apostles, to accompany Him, to be sent out to preach, and to have authority to drive out demons.

Here we see Jesus entrusting authority to the disciples to cast out unclean spirits. This was in an age in which the popular worldview was one in which illnesses, mental disorders, and distortions in the life of people were perceived to be the result of the operation of evil spirits. We may not speak of unclean spirits as the New Testament does, but there is the persistent problem of distortion in human life through the ages and in our society today.

To be entrusted with authority over unclean spirits is to have authority over those things which bring distortion to the life of people. In addition, authority over unclean spirits is one sign of the presence and operation of the Spirit of God. Jesus was, therefore, sending them to participate in the divine mission of liberation and transformation for persons living lives of distortion and brokenness. Do evil and unclean spirits still exist? Perhaps! Perhaps not! Do distortions in human life still abound? They most certainly do! There are broken relationships, abuse of various kinds, dishonesty, indiscipline, violence, anger, corruption, men and women who plot to take the lives of others, social injustice, to name a few. Christian discipleship can mean no less than a commitment to participate in God’s ongoing mission of liberating those whose lives are characterized by distortion and brokenness.

5. In St. Mark 6: 7-13 there is glimpse of Jesus giving another twist to the nature of discipleship by sending out his disciples on a mission, the mission of the Twelve. The mission of the Twelve as a response of discipleship is portrayed here in its **communal** expression. **The thing to note about this mission is that Jesus sends out the Twelve two by two**. It seems that the sending in two’s was not intended to be an indictment of the ability of each, but to emphasize the corporate/mutual dimension of the church in ministry and mission, thereby effectively playing down the narrow personal/individualistic approach of many religious persons. So, discipleship also involves the notion of mutuality, complementarity, and a sense of the corporate nature of mission and discipleship.

The notion of mutuality also seeks to confront the attitude which is present among some young people and adults who believe that they do not need to have a relationship with any community of persons to live the Christian life. In addition, there are those who seek to use technology as a way

to avoid community, and who say that they can stay at home, listen to their radio or watch television and still be as good a Christian. These days there is the option of becoming a member of a cyber community through facebook, twitter, my space, and blogging.

Some time ago there was a discussion involving young people who use twitter a lot and who claim to have a lot of friends with whom they share tweets. The question was then asked of them, if you were facing a personal crisis, to whom would you turn? Although boasting many friends on twitter, many could not identify any friend on twitter or other human being with whom they could have a face to face interaction concerning their personal problem. The truth of the matter is that the Christian life is located in the context of the community of faith and is characterized by worship, **fellowship**, discipleship, ministry and evangelism, and an inter-play of individual and corporate dynamics in the face to face encounter.

Not only does discipleship demand a sense of communal involvement and engagement, but it also points to the sense of partnership and accountability in the exercise of discipleship. It is part of the reason for the existence of the Women's Auxillary as you pool your efforts year by year to assist those congregations in their mission and ministry which do not have the resources to carry on the task on their own. It is also one reason why it is important for us to join with the other dioceses of the Province and the Anglican Communion in the observance of this season of intentional discipleship.

In the Bible there is an interesting connection between the God one follows and the life one lives. So it is that our God who is truth, justice and righteousness, will infuse the life of his disciples with these characteristics both as demand and blessing. We don't just decide we are going to practice these things and it happens. When in faith we turn to God, he allows these things to infuse our life by the activity of the Holy Spirit. Is this not also the role which the Holy Spirit played in the life of the disciples as seen in New Testament Scripture? When the Holy Spirit descended upon them they were able to be faithful witnesses to the gospel as portrayed in the Acts of the Apostles.

The real test of our faithfulness to the call to follow Jesus, is the vibrancy of our relationship with Christ, as we are told that he appointed the twelve that they might be with him; and then our readiness to be a part of his mission, as the text tells us further that Jesus called the disciples that he might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons.

Let us pray.

Lord Jesus Christ, you call us to follow you as disciples. Help us to respond wholeheartedly without counting the cost. You invite us to proclaim your gospel of hope and salvation in our homes, communities and to all people. Teach us to be faithful evangelists in word and in action. We give thanks that you came to live, incarnate, in this world. We ask you to live in us, so through us your love may be seen in the world.

AMEN.