

# Will You Come and Follow Me?

*A sermon for Proper 5C, 2025*

The Revd Andrew Rampton

ABSTRACT

---

## I HAVE QUESTIONS

This story of Jesus calling the first disciples appears in all four of the gospels. Each version has differences, as one might expect from a story being retold by different people after some years had passed. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus identifies the fishermen of whom he will make disciples and instructs them to follow him. In John's telling, the first disciples recognize Jesus and begin to trail him through the city, with Jesus's invitation to "come and see" coming after making sure that they know what they're looking for.<sup>1</sup>

In Matthew's<sup>2</sup> and Mark's<sup>3</sup> telling of the story, Jesus instructs the men to follow and they do. There's no recorded exchange and even a comment that the men do as they're told immediately. When it comes to Luke's version, however, the men called to be disciples are less willing to jump on command. Not without a conversation first, at least. Like Jesus in John's version, it may be that these fishermen want to be a little more sure about what's being sought before they answer. Or perhaps they have a sense that this command from one they call Master<sup>4</sup> has the ring of the divine about it. This situation feels awfully similar to Moses being called while tending Jethro's sheep,<sup>5</sup> or Isaiah's experience of a divine calling during his vision of the heavenly worship.<sup>6</sup>

Whatever the reason, Simon Peter and company have questions for Jesus about exactly what is afoot. They also have objections and concerns. For my part, I find these disciples

---

<sup>1</sup>John 1:35-51

<sup>2</sup>Matthew 4:18-22

<sup>3</sup>Mark 1:16-20

<sup>4</sup>Luke 5:5

<sup>5</sup>Exodus 3:1-4

<sup>6</sup>Isaiah 6:8-13

much more relatable than the ones described in Matthew and Mark.

#### **THE GHOST OF FAILURE PAST**

When Jesus instructs the men to put out into deep water, away from the shore, and let their nets down for a catch, Peter is reluctant. After all, they've been fishing all night without catching a thing. Why would the exercise work out differently now? Perhaps the deep water is a difference and the men have been too close to shore through the night. We are not told exactly why, but we do see that after sharing his skepticism, on the basis of his respect for Jesus, he is willing to give it a try.

Peter is tired. He and his companions have been working all night. They may have energy for one more cast if there had been a catch to celebrate, but there are few things as unappetizing as one more try at a task that has been a consistent failure. Peter and his men make their living fishing, so this is not the pattern every time they set out in their boats, but the spectre of this night of failure weighs heavily on them. Their respect for and faith in Jesus, their teacher and friend, is what overcomes this weight and sends them toward the enormous catch waiting in deep waters.

The weight of past failures can be crushing. We, so often, remember negative much more readily than positive. We cast as failure those efforts that did not go according to plan, even if something good came of them. A long pattern of improvement and success might be completely undone by a perceived failure, the effort then left abandoned. What a tragedy we create when a setback, or even a slowing of progress, is seen and held on to as failure. The weight of past failures can be crushing.

#### **THE GHOST OF SIN PRESENT**

Having overcome their fear and exhaustion under the weight of the night's failure, the boats set out for one more cast. With Jesus guiding the effort, they find a school of fish larger than any they have seen before. As the men are drawing in a catch of fish so big it is causing the boats to sink, Peter has a moment of panic. He sees the wonder worked on the sea. He knows it is a blessing given to him. He believes that, because of his sin, he cannot accept it. He throws himself at Jesus's feet, begging his master to leave him, for he is not worthy of this presence.

Peter knows that God keeps promises and does not make mistakes. God promises to punish the wicked and to provide for God's beloved in abundance. Peter's boat is literally sinking into the sea with the abundance of God's love and blessing and Peter is convinced that he still numbers among the wicked, deserving to be left in outer darkness far away from Jesus. Peter is aware that he is in the presence of divinity and, in spite of the evidence of God's love literally thrashing in the boat around him, Peter is convinced that Jesus will be more concerned with spearing him for his sin than with offering him a blessing.

Believing that God is more concerned with punishing sin than with restoring us to health can be paralysing. So often Christianity is painted as a moralising, judgemental, controlling religion. Too many rules about what one must and must not do. Depending on where one looks for teaching and explanation of our faith, it is possible to find streams that are focused on controlling behaviour with fear. The idea that an off-colour thought might mark you as bound for Hell is a terrifying one. And it is a toxic combination with an economic sys-

tem that is forever trying to sell us products we don't need by playing up our insecurities. We become, like Peter, fearful and self-critical in the most sick ways, eroding our sense of worth and fearing the judgement of everyone else, from our peers to God. Believing that God is more concerned with punishing sin than with restoring us to health can be paralyzing.

### THE GHOST OF EXPECTATION FUTURE

While begging Jesus to abandon him to wallow in his sin, Peter and all of those in the boats are amazed at the catch of fish around them. They have never seen so bountiful a catch before, especially not from a single cast. There will be plenty of fish for people to eat and a significant profit to be earned at the market. This is a day that will be remembered forever. It is also a day that is so amazing it will certainly not be repeated. Almost certainly, as the men are looking on in amazement, they are also growing anxious about what will happen the next day. And the day after that. The bar is suddenly so high.

Jesus tells Peter not to be fearful and tells him that, from now on, he will be fishing for people. No more nets in the water, but relationships with neighbours. This image of fishing for people, if we look only to its surface and compare it to this story, is a difficult one. It sounds as though the people of the world are objects for Peter to pick up and carry back, like fish out of the sea. This is certainly how some missionaries and evangelists have viewed those they believed were in need of Jesus. In so many cases, their zeal—often driven by the fear of sin and judgement that I just mentioned—leads them to ignore how those they seek to convert already live in relationship with Jesus Christ.

It is important, if we are to understand what Jesus means by fishing for people, that we read on through the rest of Luke's gospel account. We can breathe a sigh of relief when we realize that this process of making disciples is not one of coercion or baseless demands. Rather, it is work that Jesus and his followers go about slowly, over time, in relationships of trust. To continue with the fishing image, it is in the deep water after a long night of effort that an abundant catch is yielded. These are stories of conversations, questions, concerns, and objections which, answered with honesty and love, reveal to people the presence of God in their midst. It is a ministry that rewards consistency, patience, gentleness, and an openness to what God is doing now rather than always looking to repeat past experiences, no matter how amazing they might have been.

### COME AND SEE

This story is good news for Christians. The wisdom offered here about how to share our faith with the world and be good, helpful, sincere evangelists is important and worth reflecting upon. But there is also wisdom for how we live our own lives of faith. Understanding how God continues to evangelise us, even if we have been members of the Body of Christ for many years.

Our faith is a commitment that must be sustainable in the long term. Too hot a fire burns out very quickly and, while we all return to the dust from which we were made, we'd rather that happen in God's time, not because we force things beyond their limits or let our siblings burn out. Peter and his compatriots, exhausted with the night's work and lack of reward, were ready to pack it in for the day. This was proba-

bly a wise decision. After all, tired, discouraged workers are workers who make dangerous mistakes. Only with God's help did they find the energy for one more cast. We must recognize our own limits and, even while we pray for God's help, accept what we can and cannot do today, remembering that we will have another opportunity tomorrow.

As Peter reminds us, it is so easy to become weighed down by past failures, to become paralysed by thinking our sin is something we can redeem ourselves, or becoming discouraged by a bar that seems too high. God is always more interested in restoring us to health and love than in punishment. When we repent, repair, and return to God our past failures are put away. When we are convinced we are unworthy of love and exile ourselves, God seeks us out and finds us, reminding us that our worth was established when we were made and cannot be changed. When we believe the task before us is impossible and the bar is just too high, God reminds us that we are not alone and that, with God's help, all things are possible.

We are nearing the most holy and intense weeks of the year, with Lent starting less than a month from now. If we can make peace with our fears, what we will learn in the coming weeks and months about how God is working in our midst? This is not a question of whether God will show us, it is a question of whether we will have eyes to see and ears to hear when it is made known. Or whether we will forget God's help laid out for us and focus instead on our own shortcomings. Vestry, Lenten learning and preparation opportunities, seasonal disciplines, the drama and power of Holy Week, and the resounding joy of Easter all hold revelation for us about what God is doing. Our calling in the days ahead is simpler than we think. Even when it

seems unlikely or impossible to do, we must be ready to trust Jesus and follow when he calls us to come and see.