

Who me?

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 26 January, 2020

A Contemporary Reflection by Elizabeth Lee

Epiphany 3A

Isaiah 9: 1-4; Matthew 4: 12-23;

Contemporary Reading: *The Journey* by Mary Oliver

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://youtu.be/hUESKfi8IRE>

This morning I am choosing to focus on only five of the sixteen verses that have been proclaimed in the Judeo-Christian Scriptures for today. These five verses are often referred to as "*Jesus calls the four disciples.*" But I am more inclined to refer to them as "*Who me?*"

This story is recorded in almost identical fashion in both the Gospels of Matthew and Mark. But interestingly, the Gospels of Luke and John have different stories of call. According to Matthew and Mark, Jesus walks along the Sea of Galilee, watches two brothers Simon and Andrew casting their nets into the sea. Jesus says to them "*Follow me.*" Immediately, they abandon their nets and begin to follow Jesus.

I would be stopping and saying *Who me?* But no, they immediately abandoned their nets and follow Jesus, no questions, no discussion. Jesus walks on, presumably with Simon and Andrew behind him and comes to two more brothers, James and John. Jesus calls them. And immediately they abandon both their boats - and their father - to follow Jesus. Again, I would be asking *Who me?*

That's right. As the story has been passed down to us, we are told that four grown men, left their nets, their boats, their livelihood, their family, their identity and presumably homes, friends and possessions just to follow Jesus. No questions, no discussion. Remember that this is before Jesus has worked any miracles or begun telling stories or teaching followers.

In the context in which this story is set, Jesus has been baptized, then led into the desert, and after fasting for 40 days is tempted by the devil. Jesus - as we've heard this morning - then hears of the arrest of John, leaves Nazareth for Capernaum, and begins proclaiming the message: "*Change your hearts and minds for the kin-dom of heaven is at hand.*"

It is at this point that he walks along the shore. So, we have no reason to believe that these four men knew or had even heard about Jesus. Yet they leave everything. There is no record of them asking questions, packing a bag, preparing any food, or saying goodbye. Can you imagine that you are going about your daily activities and someone says to you "*Hey, come and follow me.*" And you drop everything and go scampering after them.

Maybe that is what Simon, Andrew, James and John actually did. Who knows? However, I suspect the story may have unfolded somewhat differently. Yet this is the story that has been handed down to us in our sacred texts.

If we are to take these texts seriously, we need to ask what is being revealed through these words to the early Christian community for whom they were recorded, and how they are speaking to us, in our lives today.

Simon, Andrew, James and John were fisherman, engaged in their daily occupation, ordinary folk, possibly poorly educated. Yet they were significant enough to be seen, named and called by Jesus. These same ordinary folk go on to play a prominent role in the gospel narrative and became leaders in the early Christian community. For me it is also significant that while individually named, they were called together.

In the story, both sets of brothers, respond immediately, creating a sense of urgency, as well as a sense of total commitment. We, as readers and hearers of the Word, know that this is in contrast to what later eventuates. For we know, as did the early Christian community, that these same people are the most unlikely of disciples, for they squabble among themselves, resist the very message Jesus is trying to promulgate and in the end, they abandon Jesus rather than accompany him through his passion.

What can baffle us, as we hear the story, is they don't even seem to reflect or prepare for their mission. Remember, they may be following Jesus with no knowledge of him or his mission. Yet they freely leave all behind and follow him. No questions asked.

In addition, to leaving their nets, boats, livelihood, identity - and in the case of James and John - their family, they are challenging the cultural values of the communities for whom the scriptures were originally written. You just did not behave like that.

This story is as much about Jesus, as well as the response of the soon-to-be disciples. Jesus' first public act in this gospel is to summon people to follow him. Jesus takes the initiative. Jesus calls ordinary people. Jesus expects and receives a complete response. So compelling is his call that they need no physical or mental preparation. Jesus calls not one, but a group, recognizing the importance of community. Through this very first act, Jesus is showing the change of heart and mind that is required to bring about the kin-dom of heaven. We, as readers, also know that these disciples later struggled, wavered, misunderstood and abandoned Jesus. But they were still the ones Jesus called.

So that is the story 2000 years ago. But what about us? How does it speak into our lives, in big and small ways?

Let me explore this by sharing some stories from my own life. I have had a varied professional life. I originally trained as a Food Technologist and have worked as a research scientist, a museum curator, community development worker and as teacher of science and religious education. I was born into a Christian family and have always taken my faith seriously and constantly involved in a faith community.

Since I was in my mid-twenties, I have been spiritually nourished through monthly conversations with a Spiritual Director. When I was 40, I was wondering if I might be being called to the ministry of Spiritual Direction, but felt I was too young. And who would come to me anyway? Notice that question again "who me?" As I approached 50, I could see that, if I was to offer Spiritual Direction by the time I was 60, something would need to change. But how could this be?"

Then, in April 2010, while I was a teacher in a Catholic High school, I went on my annual retreat to Jamberoo. On the second last day, I was, for some reason, drawn to the reading of Pentecost. In my NRSV Bible I read *“suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind.”* And I thought to myself, hang on that is not my experience of the Spirit. I don't identify with a “violent wind.”

So, I picked up a different translation and checked it out. Here the text said *“What sounded like a powerful wind from heaven”*. This was much more my experience. It so happened, that marking the Bible at this point was a flyer for a book by Joan Chittister and Rowan Williams *“Uncommon Gratitude.”* On the reverse side was an advertisement for Joan Chittister's “Benetvision Fund for Prisoners”

The response within me on reading the advertisement was startling. Was I being called to become a spiritual companion to women in prison? *Who me?* I did not even know anyone who had been to prison.

A little later in the day I asked God *“Are you wanting me to be Christ to prisoners?”* And the response I received was *“And for prisoners to be Christ to you.”* Having no idea how this would be, I returned home, shared my experience with my husband and my spiritual director and continued to reflect upon it. I began to knock on doors, and doors opened and within 16 months was appointed Chaplain at MRRC, the remand jail at Silverwater for 1000 men in custody awaiting trial.

How could a food technologist find herself, some 30 years later, as a Prison Chaplain? In my case the initiative came from God, addressed to me, a person engaged in ordinary work. The call was clear and direct. It provoked an immediate and unquestioning response involving a radical break from a former way of living. It required leaving behind financial security, current identity, tools of trade, family ties (it made no sense to my parents). And at no time has the call required an explanation. I just knew it was something I had to do. In following this call I was led into a most life-giving ministry.

Now, I realise that this is a quite dramatic experience of call. But as Fr Michael Marshi, an Episcopalian priest in Texas suggests, we may be hearing this story too narrowly. Do we interpret Jesus words *“Follow me”* in a way that is too small or restrictive? Do we tend to think that Jesus is really only speaking to those who are called to a particular vocation in life? I would like to posit that these words are being offered to all of us and applicable to all our lives in big and small ways.

I was travelling on a train. A young lad ambles in and sits opposite me, in an otherwise empty carriage. Judgmental thoughts arise: *“a Claymore boy, no, this train only goes to East Hills.”* *“Maybe from the housing commission flats at Riverwood.”* *“Not at school? Probably jiggling.”* He has some mates in the next carriage and makes faces through the carriage doors.

The boy begins then to scratch his tag in the glass window between the carriages with a stone he had been holding. Condemning judgments rise within me: *“how dare you!”* I want to yell with my teacher's voice *“Cut it out, don't vandalize public property.”* But I am no longer a school teacher and he is not a student in my care. He is now sitting with his head hanging. Then my heart warms and my judgments melt away. He looks up, our eyes meet.

I see that there is no difference between us. We are both human beings desiring to be accepted and loved. There is a deep, silent moment of connection. I ask if he is going somewhere interesting. He says *“Just going about.”*

Then he asks the same of me. I reply *"I'm going home"*. As I do, I wonder about what home he may be going to, or even if he has one. I wonder whether our interaction may be the only positive encounter he has all day. I give thanks for the grace that I was given, not to condemn him.

Had I heard the words of Jesus *"Follow me"*? Somewhere in that graced moment I resisted all those voices shouting their bad advice to reprimand him, to condemn him, ignore him. And little by little as I left those voices behind, I was able to do the only thing I could do, be the person I was called to be.

My third example springs from what I believe is the essence of Jesus' mission. In John 10:10 Jesus says *"I came that you may have life and have it abundantly"*. *"Follow me"* is Jesus' invitation to the fullness of life. The word vocation comes from the Latin *"Vocare"* – to call. So vocation isn't merely a job we have, but about who we have been created to be in the world. In the words of Frederick Buechner, *"that place where your deepest gladness and the world's hunger meet."* The place where a spark ignites within.

The Japanese have a term for this – they call it *Ikigai*. *"Follow me"* also means living from the place that brings us life, freedom, peace and ease. Those occasions include: when I stop and have meaningful conversations with others; when I mindfully prepare a vegetarian meal for guests; when I wander the botanic gardens with my camera; when I sit on the rocks with my feet in the water. Those are moments when I respond to Jesus invitation to *"follow me"* and I find myself experiencing the abundance of life.

And for my final story I return to our Contemporary reading, Mary Oliver's poem *The Journey*:

*"One day I finally knew what I had to do,
though the voices around me
kept shouting their bad advice"*

Things happened to me when I was a child, things that should not happen to children but, unfortunately, all too frequently do. There is a part of me that wants someone to apologize, and I have even scripted a conversation I wanted to have with this person. But a wise friend asked me what would happen if I did not get the apology I was seeking? At that moment I realized that my need for an apology and my reluctance to forgive without one, was robbing me of the abundance of life that Jesus was offering.

I came to recognise that I was entangled in the nets of abuse that were draining life from me. I began to hear, that the call of Jesus that was to leave behind past hurts. Like the bird in our children's storyⁱⁱ there are things I needed to leave behind.

My need for an apology was a boat that needed to be left abandoned on the shore of the lake. If I left it behind, then the fullness of life was on offer. And little by little as I left those voices behind, because I know what I have to do, and recognise the new voice as my own, I strode deeper and deeper into the world, determined to do the only thing I could do, determined to save the only life I can save, and I would add, with the grace of God.

Like I said, I doubt that this story on the shore of the Sea of Galilee is literally true. Yet I know it to be true. It has been true in my life, and on numerous occasions.

It has been true for others across our Judeo-Christian tradition. True for Abraham and Sarah, Moses, Samuel and Deborah - being well known examples from the Hebrew Scripture. Simon, Andrew, John and James from today's Gospel. And there are named and unnamed followers of Jesus in the Christian Scriptures. It has been the experience of men and women across the millennia, some well-known to us including Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Dorothy Day, Nelson Mandela, Mary Mackillop, Gandhi, Greta Thunberg and countless others, many anonymous and forgotten. I am sure you could add your own.

Let us take a moment in silence to reflect on our own life story.

What are some of the "follow me" moments in your life?

Maybe you have responded with a startled *who me?*

Can you recall a time when you knew that you just had to do something?

Or when you did drop everything because you knew you needed to leave it behind?

What invites you to delight?

And now- what about today, or at this point of time in your life. I invite you to continue the silence and listen with the ear of your heart.

Can you hear the call to live that abundance of life?

Is there an invitation to let go of something?

Are their voices around you shouting their bad advice that you need to leave behind, little by little?

How could this story be true in the circumstances of our lives today? What would it mean to follow Jesus - in this place, in this time?

Today is Australia Day- a day that divides us as a nation - a day of mourning for some, yet others are vehemently claiming it as a day of celebration. Do the words "*Follow me*" open us up to the pain and suffering that this day evokes in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People? Maybe challenging the cultural values of our times, values that need to be challenged.

At this time of climate crisis, what does it mean to hear the call "*follow me?*" What needs to be left behind? I heard someone recently say that they need to leave behind eating beef because of the damage that our beef cattle industry is doing to the planet. Others have decided that they need to curtail overseas holidays because international flights contribute significantly to greenhouse gas emissions and are something, they can choose to let go of. Members of this congregation are prepared to take direct non-violent actions even if it leads to their arrest.

In our Reflect and Connect contemplative dialogues, "*Follow me*" may mean letting go of our opinions so that other voices can be heard.

As we transition as a Parish, what do we need to leave behind?

“Follow me” asks for vulnerability and requires trust, asks for risk and requires courage, asks for hope and requires faith. And above all asks for love - and leave all that is not love behind. Yes Simon, Andrew James and John did that. And we can too.

There is a hymn Ancient Words by Michael W Smith which some of you may know:

*“Ancient words ever true,
changing me and changing you,
we have come with open hearts.
O let the ancient words impart.”*

That is what this sacred text offers. Words that, if received with open hearts, can change us - and through us change the world.

So, what will be different for you today because you came to Pitt St and heard the invitation of Jesus to leave everything and follow him. Today the ancient words from the gospel are about vulnerability, courage, and love such that we let go of everything that is hindering us from responding to the call of Jesus- *“Follow me.”*

The transforming power of the ancient words we have proclaimed this morning are echoed in *The Summons* by John Bell and Graham Maule, which we sung last week and will now sing *“Will you come and follow me And never be the same.”*

ⁱ <https://interruptingthesilence.com/2018/01/25/follow-me-moments-a-sermon-on-mark-114-20/>

ⁱⁱ Little Home Bird by Jo Empson. 2016.