

FISHERS OF MEN

Isaiah 9.1–4; Matt 4.12–23

Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.

One of the first things that Jesus did when he began his ministry was to call twelve companions to be with him, and who would carry on his work. We, and all the Church, have been called to the same task: What does it mean to be with Jesus today, in the world of Isis, Brexit and Trump?

The number twelve is significant: Israel consisted of twelve tribes, and by choosing twelve companions Jesus is symbolically founding a new Israel, a new People of God. When God chose Israel to be his people, it was not as a mark of special favour or privilege, but for a purpose: Israel would be his representatives on earth. They were called to proclaim his truth, and through their common life to show how God expected his human creation to live together. The Law contained in the first five books of the Bible sets out a distinctive social model, quite different from that of other nations. The books of Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy are not exactly a thrilling read, but when you read them carefully with the aim of discerning the kind of society they envisage, they become very illuminating. Among other things they stress the importance of rights of personality above those of property, in marked contrast to the law of Rome. The basic unit of society is not the individual or the family, so much as the person-in-community. And the moral code is light years ahead of the morality common at the time, requiring, for example, a special concern for the poor, for widows and orphans, for strangers and foreigners.

Israel did not live up to its calling; it became too concerned on the one hand to be like the other nations, but also with its racial and religious exclusiveness. And so God, through Jesus, calls a new Israel, beginning with the twelve. They, too, were called not for privilege, but for a purpose. Those who are with Jesus are called to proclaim his good

news, so that people can see how they are to live. This is the note on which St Matthew ends his gospel: 'Go therefore to all nations and make them my disciples.' (Matt 28.19), and for this work they are empowered by the Holy Spirit. When the disciples were gathered together after the resurrection, Jesus appeared among them and said, 'Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I send you.' And he breathed on them saying, 'Receive the Holy Spirit!' (John 20.21-22)

Those who are with Jesus are empowered and commissioned to proclaim the good news. The essence of their message, as Jesus himself said, was that the kingdom of God is among us. Its hard for us to get the message right, because the word 'kingdom' is misleading. It suggests a political entity, like the UK, whereas the concept is more dynamic and more personal. The scholars say what Jesus was talking about was the 'kingly rule' of God, it is the spirit of God that is among us. The good news is not that Jesus created a worldly *kingdom* – something *static*, but that through him the *kingly rule* of God is released in the lives of men and women – something powerful and *dynamic*! The kingly rule of God is the power of the Holy spirit in our lives, a power that touches the hearts of men and women, changing us, making us more Christ-like, and which shapes the human society that we create. This is what we pray for in the Lord's Prayer: 'Your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.' Jesus did not teach us to ask God to help us get to heaven, but to help us build heaven on earth:

The new Israel, the new people of God, have the same calling as the ancient people of God: to bring heaven to earth. 'The kingdom of God is among you.' Jesus is saying to us: 'You have within you the power and the inspiration to build a just and caring society. My laws show the way; they teach you the values that make for peace. Trust in the gift that I give you, and you can create heaven on earth.'

That's the story that those who are with Jesus are sent to proclaim; that's the story that we are sent to proclaim. Is that the story that we actually tell? What is the story that is told in the world of Isis, Brexit and Trump? It doesn't sound to me like a story of heaven being built on

earth. It doesn't seem to me to have much to do with God's special concern for the poor, the vulnerable, and the stranger. Jesus' story is about building bridges rather than walls, about reaching out in hospitality and reconciliation rather than turning away in rejection. The story that I hear is one where me and my needs come first, and where the devil can take the hindmost; a story in which we close our ears and our hearts to the cry of the poor and the needy and pull up the drawbridge; a story where compassion is sacrificed on the altar of individual choice, and where ethics take second place to economics.

Many factors led to the advent of Isis, Brexit and Trump, of course, but it seems to me that one common factor is the angry demand for justice from those who feel left out or oppressed by the world of power that has produced this story, a world in which rights of personality take second place to rights of property, and which militates against any idea of the person-in-community. The response has been one of division and separation, of emphasising difference and demonising opponents. This is a rejection of the kingly rule of God; it is not a Christian response; and the tragedy is that this angry protest has opened the door to the populists of the far right, because salvation will not come from those who have largely created today's world. The rise of the far right is something that should disturb us as Christians, because the values of the far right, just like those of the far left, are opposed to the gospel.

In times of change and anxiety God calls us to be true to the gospel, and to work for a society that is fair to all, the poor as well as the rich, that is open and hospitable to the stranger and those in need; a society in which we choose to do what is right simply because it is right, and not to cut the moral corners because it is expedient so to do. Being with Jesus is being true to what God has ordained.

Daniel O'Leary, a priest who writes for *The Tablet*, said recently that we Christians have a choice: do we tell the popular story of difference and separation, or do we tell the gospel story about our oneness in Christ? Can we affirm the great conviction of St Paul that in Christ the traditional lines that divide and separate people have no place? For

Paul, living by God's kingly rule means that 'there is no such thing as Jew and Greek, slave and freeman, male and female; for you are all one person in Christ Jesus.' (Gal. 3.28) In Christ the usual sources of discrimination – race, social status and gender – are overcome, and the loving values of justice, fairness, equality, mutual respect and hospitality (especially towards those who are different) find a home. And if we can affirm these values, surely we have to affirm them in the market place just as much as in the holy place – in our public, commercial and political lives just as much as in our personal lives.

In today's gospel St Matthew quotes a prophecy of Isaiah, which, he says, is fulfilled in Jesus: 'The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.' Christ is the light that dawned on a dark and uncertain world, and however dark the world becomes, his light will never be overcome. In the world of Isis, Brexit and Trump he is the one who shows us the way forward. St Matthew tells us that Jesus began his ministry proclaiming, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.' 'Repent' is a strong word; it means 'turn around, face a new direction, follow a different course.' The prophecy of Isaiah to which Matthew refers is a prophecy of freedom. At a time when Israel was oppressed by the Assyrians, the Lord assures them that he has broken rod of their oppressor, the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, and they are to rejoice in their deliverance as those who divide plunder. The deliverance that God promises is not a spiritual deliverance, but a material deliverance – from oppression, injustice, arbitrary power and slavery. It is the same God who called Israel of old, who calls his Church today – those who are with Jesus – to show the world a better way, to trust in the power of his kingly rule, and to live according to his values. This, I believe, is the only way his peoples will be delivered from fear, oppression, injustice, and arbitrary power. There really is no alternative.

To God be the glory, now and for ever. Amen.