

Sermon on Sunday 3 December 2023

by Rev. Alan Stewart

(Readings: Isaiah 52 7-10 & Matthew 4 18-22)

Advent, Andrew and the Gift of Pause

I was once walking along Tottenham Court Rd, minding my own business, when a man with a wide smile and a clipboard stepped in front of me. And before I knew it, I was in a windowless room filling out a personality test for the Church of Scientology. After an extremely uncomfortable and hard-sell interview afterwards, during which all my faults and failures were kindly pointed out to me, I eventually managed a get-away without forking out hundreds of pounds on a course guaranteed to transform my life. I still, to this day, have no idea what the man did or said to lure me into Scientology Central, but since then I've kept away from strangers with wide smiles and clipboards.

Picture yourself, for a moment, innocently going about your business when suddenly, from nowhere, a man steps in front of you and confronts you with a two-word command: 'Follow me'. How would you respond? Ignore him? A polite 'not today, thanks'? Reach for the mace spray?

Consider for a moment, then, this young fisherman Andrew. He and his brother are dutifully attending to the nets of the family

business when this upstart Rabbi approaches and says those exact same words: 'Follow me'.

And, without so much as a moment's pause to weigh up the pros and cons, they both immediately drop their nets and leave their family and livelihoods behind. Why? Did this Jesus possess some irresistible charisma or technique later adopted by Scientologists?

To understand their response, we first need to understand that the vast majority of Jewish boys were only educated up to the age of about twelve, with only the elite creamed off for further study. Eventually, a rabbi would select only the very best, the most promising scholars, to become potential disciples. So, when these two blue-collar 'rejects' are invited by a rabbi to become his disciples, it's an offer they just can't refuse.

It was the greatest honour, the biggest vote of confidence; a bit like David Beckham turning up to Sunday morning five-a-side and asking the worst player to become his protégé. When a Rabbi chose a disciple, he was saying, 'You, too, can be like me'.

A few days ago, we celebrated St Andrew, patron saint of fishermen, Scotland and certain churches. On this Advent Sunday, as we reflect and prepare for that great mystery we call Incarnation - God with us, God for us; God in human flesh appearing - what, I wonder, might Andrew have to teach us?

In John's gospel we find a slightly different version of events. Andrew, we're told, is already a disciple of John the Baptist; that

enigmatic Old Skool prophet with a revolutionary and uncomfortable message of repentance: 'Turn away from your sins because the day of Christ, the Long expected One, is dawning'.

This message had somehow resonated with Andrew. He, like so many others, had been waiting for the One who would restore justice and peace, a new world order. And he was willing to sign up to a movement of mass baptisms and radical living. But then, one day, his master John began saying, 'It's no longer about me, it's now about him, he's the One,' pointing at his cousin, Jesus.

Now, Andrew could have stayed with what he knew. Jesus' message would, in fact, turn out to be ever more revolutionary and demanding than John's. At least with John, it appears he was still able to continue his work as a fisherman, for example, but this Jesus was calling him to fish for people, new converts; to step into the unknown, to trust him with his life; not only HIS life, but the life of his family.

Advent is an invitation to step out from what's comfortable. For all the beauty of Advent, its message is actually uncompromising. This is a time to face the uncomfortable, and often inconvenient, truth about ourselves; we fail; we mess up; we break things. That is a truth about who we are. And if we are to move on, beyond, into becoming more of who we are intended to be, then we have to face that. But it isn't, of course, the whole truth. The whole truth is that, despite that, we are unbelievably loveable and loved and capable of the most extraordinary love.

Advent is a time to search for the whole truth about ourselves. We search our hearts and our motives and we bring that truth into the loving light of God's help and healing. We ask ourselves fundamental questions like: 'What am I living for?'; 'What needs to change?'; How can I really live while I'm alive?'.

The gift of Advent is the pause, the hush before the curtain rise at Christmas. Most of our lives are on autopilot. We sleepwalk through life. We need moments to stop, to hit the pause button, so that we can begin to wake up, to invest in what brings us to life.

So, this Advent I'd like to give you the gift of pause, a few seconds just to stop and be and hopefully encounter the Christ of Christmas.

Take a little dot sticker, if you have one at home, and put that dot somewhere where you will regularly look at it; your watch, your phone, maybe. In some traditions they have mindful bells which, when rung, call us to stop and just breathe, just be. This mindful dot is the equivalent. It's a call to pause, to close our eyes if we can, to take five deeper breaths, and with each breath to silently evoke the name of Jesus, the first syllable with the in-breath, the second with the out. There are many names for this – one of them is practicing the presence.

Maybe you could try that now.

Andrew chose to risk everything to follow Jesus, what followed changed his life and the history of the world. He dared to believe that God has a unique purpose for his life, and he was willing to sacrifice his security and reputation for it.

Jesus invites you and me into this same adventure. 'Follow me,' he says, 'into this Advent. Let's take time to pause together, welcome me into every moment, ask the difficult questions, and dream dreams of the life I created you for.'

