

Sermon on Sunday 7 November 2021 by Forbes Mutch, Lay Leader of Worship

(Gospel: Mark 1. 14-20)

I don't know whether you agree, but our gospel reading this morning is remarkable for a number of reasons.

It's a familiar story and it includes the often-quoted phrase: *'I will make you fishers of men'*. It marks the beginning of Christ's ministry, as he gathers around him the 12 disciples who will eventually form the bedrock of a new religion.

But the passage is deceptively understated. When you think about it more deeply, there are some almost shocking things going on in the lives of the people featured in the story.

You have to remember that Andrew and his brother Simon (later called Peter) would have been devout Jews, following a community faith thousands of years old. And then suddenly, at the drop of a net, they go off with a new prophet on the block who is teaching a completely different form of faith based on having a very personal relationship with God. It's a shocking turn of events.

You can imagine their parents a year later, sitting around the dining room table with friends, talking about life, and

someone says: *'How are those two boys of yours? Still missing, are they?'*

'Oh yes,' says the father, *'they're out there somewhere, still following that Jesus bloke. They've really gone off the rails.'*

And it's the same with James and John. They just turn round and say to their father: *'Sorry Dad, we're out of here. We're going to the biggest gig of the century. This Jesus is amazing. He's going to win Palestine's Who's Got Talent. We've gotta go.'* And they do; they leave their dumbfounded father in the boat with the hired hands. It's shocking.

Forgive me, I'm being flippant and light-hearted about something that, at the time, was very dramatic and serious. It doesn't come across like that in Mark's gospel, but it demonstrates from the very beginning, Christ's charismatic ability to suddenly turn lives upside down.

He breaks the mould of the people around him; he jolts the established faith of Andrew and Simon and James and John. He makes them see the world completely differently. Follow me, he says, and they do, without any hesitation.

Has that ever happened to you? I don't mean the moment you first came to believe in Jesus, but when your seemingly firm faith is jolted and you suddenly start seeing it or believing in it from a completely new perspective?

I've been reading a book recently called '*Holy Envy, Finding God in the Faith of Others*' by Barbara Brown Taylor.

Some of you might have heard of Barbara, as she is quite a well-known American theological author. She was (is) an ordained Christian minister who gave up her original calling and became a college lecturer, leading a course that introduced students to the major religions of the world. As she developed the content of the course, she discovered a deeper understanding of God.

She promised her students that studying other faiths would not make them lose theirs, so it came as a jolt to her to realise that her own faith began to look different when lined up with the others.

It made me think about how my own faith - and maybe yours and the faith of other people - can be jolted, not necessarily by a college course (although sometimes by what we read) but by circumstance, by experience, by things like illness, bereavement and stress; things that are usually out of our control but that we have to cope with. These things can disorientate us and skew us off the once-secure trajectory of what we believe. And it can be very scary.

I'd like to read a passage from Barbara Brown Taylor's book, so bear with me, sit back, make yourself comfortable and hear the story.

Once, a long time ago, I lost a dog. She was only ten months old and was my first Jack Russell terrier. She was wearing a new collar, so when she smelled something exciting on the wind just before sunset, she slipped her lead before I even felt her tug.

Then she was off, with more than a hundred acres to explore, while I ran behind her, calling her name, as though she cared. I chased her through bushes, through running streams and through barbed wire fences before she finally paused for breath and I grabbed her by the tail. She then panted happily into my arms, while I tried to remember where my house had gone. I was lost.

About 20 minutes later, I walked up a hill towards a barn, trying to work out which neighbour's place I had arrived at; was it the Tipton's or the Holcombe's. The barn was weathered, like the Tipton's, but it was also unpainted, like the Holcombe's.

And then, I realised that it was my own barn that I was looking at, though from such an unfamiliar angle that it was as if I had never seen it before. I was also extremely stressed, which meant that I was thinking more about the dog in my arms than the barn on the hill. Either way, I was totally charmed when my own barn snapped into view and I saw it as if for the first time.

Thank you, Barbara.

Her point and my point about Christ's encounter with his first prospective disciples, is that a sudden change of perspective on life can be worrying, unsettling and scary at the time, but it can, and often does, lead to a change for the better.

Has it ever happened to you? That your view of a barn, a person, a photograph or painting or one of the fundamental religious truths of your faith suddenly changes? If it has - or if it does at some point in the future - look at it as a gift from God. It is a great thing to see something familiar from an unfamiliar angle for the first time, even if it is because you have been worried or frightened or lost.



It's sometimes the way God works.

Amen

Holy Envy - finding God in the faith of others

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