

Sermon for Sunday 22 January 2017  
All Saints Church, Birkenhead  
*Revd Jordan Greatbatch*

Isaiah 9:1-4

1 Corinthians 1:10-18

Matthew 4:12-23

There's a strange 'in-between-ness' about this time of the year:

- All the hype of Christmas and New Year is over
- Some of us are back at work, others are still away
- For young people, those horrible 'back-to-school' ads have started, and we don't want even to think about it!
- For older people, living alone, all the familiar routines are on hold, until the year really begins in February

It is a time with an element of anti-climax, a certain emptiness, and for many a time of financial anxiety.

In the Church's liturgical calendar, there is also an in-between-ness:

The joyful celebration of Christmas and Epiphany is over, and we now await Ash Wednesday in at the end of February.

Through the period of Lent we will be thinking about the sombre journey towards the Cross, and cost of being a disciple of Jesus.

It's as though the cute Baby Jesus has grown up too fast, and we know he'll soon be making demands of us.

Today's gospel reading from Matthew chapter 4 expresses this transition very well.

We have had readings focus on John the Baptist and the transition between his ministry and the ministry of Jesus.

In these passages he declares how important Jesus is. And so in today's Gospel we have Jesus himself appearing and calling individuals to follow him:

first Simon called Peter, his brother Andrew, then James and his brother John, sons of Zebedee.

Right through the Bible we read of all sorts of people being called by God to a particular task or responsibility:

- Abraham is called to leave his country and make a new start in a strange land

- Moses is called from minding animals, to liberate his people from slavery
- Samuel, as a young lad, is called in the dead of night to be a prophet
- Jeremiah is called to be a prophet to the nations, and when he says 'But I'm only a boy' God says '*Don't say that! Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you.*' (Jer. 1:4-7)
- Mary is called to bear the infant Messiah
- And in each of the gospels we read of the disciples called by Jesus to follow him, and carry on his ministry.

In every case, they are called to move out of their comfort zone to be and do something for which God knows they have the ability, even though they may not realise or believe it.

The meaning of the word 'vocation' (being called to something) has changed over the centuries. In the Middle Ages, it was used almost exclusively to refer to the religious life of monks and nuns.

In the Reformation Era, Calvin and Luther reacted to such a narrow view, and considered

that any trade or profession a Christian person did was their divine calling.

Today, in our secularised world, we speak of vocation in a very general sense, without any implication that God has had anything to do with it.

If the Medieval view of 'vocation' was far too narrow, and the modern view is too broad, then we as Christians do well to consider the calling we have committed ourselves to through our baptism.

In the liturgy of Baptism and Confirmation in the NZ Prayer Book, we read these words:

*Those who are baptised are called to worship and serve God.*

*Will you commit yourself to this life?*

The candidate's response is this:

*Through God's grace I will forgive others as I am forgiven;*

*I will seek to love my neighbour as myself, and strive for peace and justice;*

*I will accept the cost of following Jesus Christ in my daily life and work;*

*with the whole Church I will proclaim by word and action*

*the Good News of God in Christ.*

That is one powerful and demanding statement of vocation!

It does not define what our actual life's work will be, but it says that whatever our work is, we are called to do it with utmost Christian integrity.

Whether we are a doctor or builder, a nurse or a shop-worker.

Whether we sit in a manager's office, are retired or stand in a queue at the WINZ office.

Whether we are at home caring for kids or house-bound through illness or frailty...

We are called to do and be those things, with integrity, justice and love.

No matter what we are or where we are, that is the bottom line of our Christian calling – and it can be very demanding, day by day.

But there is always the possibility, that God is not finished with us; that there is something new in store for us, if only we have the eyes and ears to discern it.

Jesus called Peter and Andrew, James and John to something alongside and beyond their life as fishermen.

There is always an interesting and important link between the calling of the disciples and the calling of the Old Testament prophets.

In most cases, the receiving of the call and the response to it are not purely an individual matter.

In most cases, other people were involved.

If we take for example the story of the calling of Samuel. You may remember that Samuel mistook the voice in the night for that of Eli, and it was some time before he understood that it was a divine call.

It took the youthful spontaneity of Samuel and the mature wisdom of the old man Eli, to figure out what was going on and to respond.

In the gospel reading, there is domino effect:

John is arrested and Jesus withdraws to Galilee.

And it is from here that he meets Simon and his brother Andrew. And so on.

What new thing might God be calling you and I to be and do in this new year? And how will we discern that call, and how will we respond?

More often than not, as with Samuel & the disciples, our experience of God's calling is not just a 'God and Me' affair.

Other people are usually involved somehow:

*You are very good at meeting new people...*

*You'd make a great teacher.....*

*Would you like to help with such and such a project?...*

*Have you ever considered the ordained ministry?*

God is often lurking within and behind conversations like these.

We need to listen carefully, to think and pray, to seek the advice of others whose opinions we trust.

And then to discern where that idea has really come from, and could it be God's call to me.

So in this awkward time of January, as we try to hang on to the holiday mood while, at the same time, gearing up for the year ahead, what is it that God may be trying to say to us about who we need to be, and what we need to do?

As we as a church face an uncertain future, what do we need to change? What do we need to let go

of in order to see what God may have for us in the future? Any change like this can be painful and daunting. But if we trust that God is with us, and calls us, as he did those first disciples, then perhaps we too can follow Jesus into an unknown but exciting future.