

3rd Sunday of the Year

Year B

The Lord Who Teaches Us His Ways.

*Like Jonah, Christ was sent to preach repentance.
He calls us to change our ways. We are not to become engrossed in the world,
but to believe the good news and live for the kingdom of God.*

(Readings: Jonah 3: 1-5, 10. 1 Corinthians 7: 29-31. Mark 1: 14-20.)

After attending, what I believe was his local church, one Sunday, Robert Louis Stevenson made the following entry in his diary:

“Went to Church this morning, and strange to say,
I was not greatly depressed.”

With all due respect to the great man, for the life of me, I cannot understand where some people get the idea that religion is dull; that faith in God somehow suffocates the soul, emptying it of all the vitality and all the joy in life, somehow replacing it with misery and gloom.

All I can say is that we, as a Church, must have drifted a very long way from the times of its earliest days; from that time when Christians had been described in the New Testament as being ‘absurdly happy, and always getting into trouble.’ Just look at four of its founder members – Peter and Andrew, James and John – simple fishermen in business for themselves, happily planning their futures, working hard to expand their operation. Then one day they looked into the eyes of a Galilean Carpenter, and heard him say, “Follow me.” Inexplicably, and without the slightest hesitation, they turned their lives upside-down, leaving their homes and families, and all they owned in the world, to do just that. *That* is the religion of New Testament Christianity!

Ours is a religion that is as exiting, as it is unpredictable and challenging. – It is a religion that is both vital and immediate; a religion which, in its truest, most honest expression, is the most wonderfully fascinating thing that life can ever offer. That is not to say that it is an overtly romantic or naively idealistic religion. But neither is it simplistic or rudimentary. What I am saying is that what happened in the 1st century, that enthused such infectious excitement can and, moreover, does happen today.

Christianity carries with it the promise, and the authentic romance of becoming something. – Jesus said to the four fishermen, “Come, follow me and I will make you into fishers of men.” Can you think of anything more inviting, anything more thrilling; that ordinary, simple people can rise above the present, and become something they had never been or known before?

Christianity is also the religion of redemption. It is the offer of another chance to those who have missed the way. And there is nothing dull or tame about that.

Here we have four fishermen on the Sea of Galilee who one day, see and hear this remarkable Individual. He doesn’t sound like their other religious leaders. He sounds like the voice of the Prophets. – And as he speaks to them on the seashore, and on the hillside, they feel a lump in their throats, and real hope in their hearts. He awakens in them a challenge to achieve great and wonderful things, and of living for high ideals.

By the irresistible attraction of Jesus' Spirit, the desire is stirred in them to get up and be something they haven't been before, something they hadn't even dared to dream about. His message to us is equally simple, and equally direct: *We too*, can be different. *We too*, can be fired with high ideals, and our characters can be, likewise, ennobled.

Though we can sometimes be small-minded and mean, lazy, selfish and greedy, we do not have to stay that way. For the voice of Our Lord and Saviour is inviting us to follow him; to be what he intended us to be; to be far lovelier than we could ever be on our own.

As 'authentic' religion is the wonderful romance of *becoming* something, it is also the religion of *doing* something. Jesus spoke to these fishermen about going into the business of fishing for people. That means that our small lives can be joined in partnership with the creative purposes of God.

Real religion doesn't get us *out* of life. It gets us *into* life. – We are not Christians just to escape hell, and skip right on into heaven, we are Christians because we believe that the greatest challenge in life – all life – is to stand in our generation, as others have stood in theirs, for the abiding things that Christ stands for.

The most powerful, the most exciting revolution going on in this world, is the divine programme of human redemption – 'fishing for people'. God has paid us the compliment of calling us to be partners in the divine redemption of the world.

Jesus comes to each of us and repeats the words he spoke to his disciples – "Come after me and I will make you into fishers of men." He calls us to help those in need – *practically* – to do the same kind of things that he did during his earthly ministry. When he says, "Come, follow me" he leads the way, showing us clearly and precisely, what it means to be a truly 'redemptive' person.

The main features of Jesus' life were compassion and friendship. Where people were hungry, he set himself the task of feeding them. When they were sick, he was concerned for their healing. If they were lonely, he offered them friendship. Those who had been ostracised and rejected found acceptance in his presence. To give just one of countless examples; there was Zachaeus in Jericho, despised and distrusted until, that is, his life was touched by the life of Jesus. Acceptance and friendship did something for, and to Zachaeus; something that all the empty rhetorical moralising in the world could never do.

To be a 'redemptive' person means so very much more than mere words, however heartfelt and evocative they are. It means giving of yourself, and involving your life in the needs, and in the problems of other people. Of course, that's not easy. But if you were to give it a try, you would find it the most rewarding, the most engagingly romantic work in the world.

And so, if you should hear someone say religion is dull, simply tell them of the exciting challenge Christ offered those fishermen; and how that same challenge is offered to each and every one of us. Tell them also, that if they do take it up, they will discover that there is true romance in religion, that ours is a religion of real excitement.