

## Commitment and Calling

Morning Worship at St John's and St James

Sunday 11<sup>th</sup> July 2021

Kate Day

Mark 6:14-29

Amos 7:7-15

Romans 12:4-8

### **Part 1, following Mark reading.**

If you were at St John's or St James last week, either in person or via the livestream, you will have heard Paul speaking about the passage immediately prior to this one; the passage where Jesus calls his disciples, and then sends out his 12 followers to do his work in the surrounding villages. And you may recall Paul speaking about how we are also "called" and then "sent out" to do God's work, and encouraging us all to think about how we might do that.

So, this week, I want to pick up on some of those thoughts, and maybe help us to take them a bit further on.

For as Paul said at the end of last week's sermon, we are on the threshold of a new season. Lots of things are, or will shortly be, starting up – either again, or for the first time. And everyone who considers themselves to be part of God's community, God's church, God's family here in Shirley Parish has a part to play in that.

So, I can hear you wondering, what on earth can the bloodthirsty and frankly rather distasteful story we have just heard possibly show us about that? Let's see....

So - John, the baptiser (otherwise known as John the Baptist). We know he's Jesus' cousin and he was in many ways the last of the OT prophets – sent by

God to proclaim the coming of the Messiah. And he had fallen foul of Herod (Herod Antipas, the son of the Herod who plays such an appalling role in the Nativity story), who was the puppet ruler for the Romans of the region, because John was unremitting in his condemnation of Herod's domestic arrangements.

And yet, Herod was clearly intrigued by him. It seems like he recognised that what John was saying came from God. He liked to listen to him. And yet, for whatever reason, he couldn't quite bring himself to do something about what he heard.

Maybe his wife and family weren't interested, and he didn't want to inconvenience them.

Maybe he recognised that he needed to change the way he was living his life, but was too comfortable in it to be able to let it go.

Maybe he was afraid of the consequences of doing so.

Whatever it was, it seems to me that he had come to regard John and his message as a pastime. Maybe a pleasant interlude for an otherwise dreary morning.

Maybe it made him feel a bit better about himself. Looked as if he was taking God seriously. Helped him to think that he was actually not such a bad guy after all.

But without any intention of allowing what he heard to actually impact on his life.

Maybe he actually regarded John's life-changing and life-saving message as, well, entertainment.

Whereas what God invites us to is not entertainment, but commitment.

God invites us and welcomes us in – just as we are. But we have to respond to the invitation. At some point our involvement needs to move from watching from the sidelines – maybe we might say being 'entertained' - to making that

commitment to follow him, to become one of his people, part of his family, someone who is involved.

We have to make a commitment, not just to treat God's message, God's invitation as entertainment. God, in Jesus, offers himself to us fully. That's what we see on the cross.

Our only proper response is to offer ourselves fully in return.

In these days of the European football jamboree we might put it this way - Christianity is not a spectator sport.

So let's leave it there for now, and Doug and Glenys are going to come and read a couple more passages from Scripture for us/ listen to a couple more passages from Scripture, to help us in our next step.

### **[Amos and Romans readings]**

So – Christianity is not a spectator sport.

Which is pretty much what St Paul is saying in the first part of the reading from the letter to the Romans which we have just heard.

Offer our bodies as 'living sacrifices' - offer our whole lives back to God.

A different version of the Bible translates those words this way

*So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and*

*quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.*

You'll be changed from the inside out

God loves us just as we are – and too much to leave us that way.

Commitment to God leads to change in us.

Big steps. Little ones.

Worship. Prayer. Understanding gained from and through Scripture.

Through each other as we follow God together in community –

who else was inspired by the Eco team on Climate Sunday a couple of weeks back?

As we gather and share our understanding of who God is and what that means in our every day lives.

Groups, like

START and Moving On.

Pilgrim.

Way of Discipleship.

All ways in which little by little we are changed from the inside out.

Which brings us to Amos, the prophet we have just heard about. For those of us who like a bit of OT history to set the context, Amos was doing his stuff around 750 years before Jesus, and about 200 years after the grandsons of King David had had the most almighty falling out and the “Promised Land” had split into two – the Northern kingdom, often known as Israel, with a temple at Bethel, and the Southern Kingdom, or Judah, whose people worshipped in Jerusalem.

Amos was a native of the Southern Kingdom where he worked the land. He wasn't a priest or a scribe or any part of the religious establishment. Perhaps a modern day equivalent might be a car mechanic or landscape gardener. But he was clearly fully committed to God, for when God said "Go", he went. To the centre of worship in the Northern Kingdom - what was in effect another country.

A bit like Jonah – but without the whale.

A bit like our mechanic or landscape gardener going to Glasgow Cathedral – or even Times Square in New York - and starting to preach there – warning them that unless they changed their ways then disaster would surely come.

And if you want to know what happened next – well they didn't. And around 25 years later the kingdom was defeated and the people were taken into exile - and their descendants were the Samaritans. But that is another story.

Back to Amos.

So Amos was committed to God, and God, by his Spirit, empowered him to travel all that way, and preach a message which wasn't exactly welcomed.

And so we look at Amos, and others like him. At Peter, leaving his family and his occupation to follow Jesus. At Paul, standing on 1<sup>st</sup> century street corners and preaching his heart out to anyone who would listen.

And we think – HELP! I couldn't do that.

But hang on a minute – if we look more closely in the Bible we see others who were committed to Jesus, and who were called to do other things entirely.

You probably remember the story of the time when Jesus healed a man with mental health problems and all the local pigs ran down the hillside and threw themselves in to the sea. After that, the story goes on to tell about how the

man asks to go with Jesus, and Jesus says “No, I want you to stay put and tell your story here.”

Or the story of busy Martha and her sister Mary, who Jesus commended for being still and paying attention to him. Where she was.

Or the story of a rich woman called Lydia who offered hospitality to St Paul and his companions in Philippi, and opened her home to be the meeting place of the church which was established in that city.

They all offered who they were, and the gifts that they had been given by God, back to God, to be used by God.

Incidentally, if you would like a modern-day equivalent of Lydia offering her home, I know of at least 2 people in this parish who view their cars in exactly the same way. As gifts from God to be used in his service. I wonder if that might catch on, so we can offer lifts to people so they can join in with worship or other activities?

Maybe being ‘sent out’ really means being ‘sent out’ from the comfort of our usual routine. ‘Sent out’ to intentionally offer something to help God’s kingdom to grow.

For in truth – we all have something we can offer. The end of the passage from Romans today started with rather daunting gifts, but moves on to much more everyday things – encouragement, generous giving, showing compassion.

Sometimes the greatest gift we can offer is just to ‘turn up’. To come to the new Welcome Café when it opens, maybe volunteer with Jimmy Tots - not as a leader, but as someone who will sit and have a coffee, and make others welcome. Something we are looking to start as things open up more is to build links with the many local care homes and sheltered accommodation complexes – just by one or two people committing to going into that place on a fairly regular basis to chat to any residents who would like someone to talk to.

All these are about 'being there'. Being available to chat to people who maybe we don't know yet. Just be friendly. For by being friendly, we are showing something of the character of God – maybe to someone who doesn't really even know about God at all yet.

We often speak about how the Spirit of God enables us to do things we feel wobbly about. Yes – sometimes, like Amos, it is dramatic. But remember that the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Jesus, is love - “God is love” as it says in John's first letter. When we are filled with God's love it overflows to others we meet as we welcome them, listen to them, maybe offer help and support if needed and wanted.

It's not (necessarily) about spectacular things. It's about responding to God's self-giving love for us, by selflessly loving God in response and showing that love to others.

And this is something we can all do. We are never too old, too infirm, too anything not to be able to offer our gifts in God's service. Yes, our circumstances may change, but we always always have something we can offer to God in the service of others. Even if we are not as mobile as we once were. Even if we are housebound. Making things. Phoning others to encourage them. Writing letters. Praying.

So – what about it?

We've talked about how Christianity is not a spectator sport....

We've thought about our response to God's self-giving love....

We've explored how that might lead to us being 'sent out' – not necessarily to go somewhere else, or to do something spectacularly scary, but being 'sent out' from our usual routine. And how that's about using the gifts God has given us, and can be as simple as just 'turning up and being friendly'.

What's next?

How are you going to respond?