

They went off to follow him...

Mark 1:20

We've always known about the gospels' references to fishes and fishing. Around the Sea of Galilee were the villages regularly referred to like Bethsaida, Capernaum and Magdala. The lake itself ( about 20 kms long and 11 kms wide) was where as many as seven of the disciples fished for a living(John 21:2-3). This Sea of Galilee was in a Rift Valley, 210 metres below sea level. In winter, it was swept by freezing winds, in summer, lifeless hot air hung above it. Violent storms could rush down from the surrounding mountains with little warning, whipping up 10 metre waves. Men fished from boats, slow but steady craft about 8 metres long with a 2 metre beam. We know about them from the 1986 discovery by archaeologists of one such fishing boat. They had a mast, a cabin shelter, with oars mounted on both sides. They carried sail, stone anchors, dry clothes, food, baskets, a net and torches, usually with a crew of six men: this the gospel accounts tell us.

The most productive fishing grounds were where springs and streams fed into the lake and the local fishermen often worked there at night with torches. In deep water two boats would work as a team, with a net between them to encircle the fish but in the shallows a boat would take a dragnet from the shore and dump the fish on land. Sometimes they stood on the shore and cast a net into the water and pulled the fish in it towards them.

Some of the fish was sold locally but most of it was dried or pickled, stored in clay amphoras and exported to Jerusalem or overseas. Now, the fishermen we read about from the lectionary were patient and hard- working but certainly not fishing to provide food for their families. They were part of a co-op or guild: this wasn't subsistence fishing. This was a business operation.

If we can be excused for using a sociological term from today in reference to Jesus' day, these four fishermen were middle-class entrepreneurs, not Galilean peasants. Take the Zebedee family as an example. Father owned at least two boats and paid for their crews and his sons James and John had a boat each. Simon and Andrew owned their own boats and fishing equipment. They were no fools. They had some panache about them, some style. They were fishermen-contractors running stable businesses.

This makes it all the more remarkable that Jesus turns up on the shore of the lake, asks them to follow him, and they do. If Jesus can be said to have a home, at least he had residence in Capernaum. He travelled up and down and across the lake and the lives of fishing families became the fabric from which he wove many of his metaphors and

stories:remember the account of Jesus sitting in a boat talking to his audience? And there's one other thing: the Galileans were the most religious Jews in the world in the time of Jesus. They were not simple, uneducated peasants from an isolated region. Bible references tend to belittle them because of their passionate religious commitment to Jewish belief. And Galilee was on a major trade route: Galileans were constantly coming up against travellers from other lands and were open to all sorts of ideas. They were more cosmopolitan than the Jews in Jerusalem.

By the time Jesus had begun his ministry he had completed his education and training as a rabbi. The gospel record is full of all sorts of people referring to him as rabbi: members of the religious establishment, Pharisees and their like, all addressed him as 'rabbi' and the common people including the disabled and the blind all called him 'rabbi'. There were two kinds of rabbis, though both with the same background: there were the conservative rabbis who toed the party line and would never give public offence. And there were what were called 's'mikhah' rabbis, rabbis who had great personal appeal and intellectual gifts and whose radicalism set them apart from other teachers. S'mikhah rabbis tended to be itinerant, travelling from place to place, rather than serving in one particular synagogue. Jesus was a s'mikhah rabbi and the Galileans around the lake all knew it:he was the kind of rabbi who would often say, 'You have heard...but I say...'The fact that Jesus was a rabbi gave him clout and the believing Galileans found him a breath of fresh air.

When, then, he comes across Simon and Andrew with their casting net and then James and John in their boat attending to the maintenance of their nets he is no stranger to them. They've all heard of this young s'mikhah rabbi, maybe even listened to one of his story-tellings. So when he calls to them, their response is not blind obedience. This is someone they know about, someone who seems to make sense to them. They're already religious men in terms of belief and commitment. The way Jesus uses an idea from their trade appeals to them: he wants them to go fishing for the lives of men and women. So off they go at his bidding. Usually people who were prepared to follow a religious teacher would ask the teacher if he would accept them:here Jesus turns things upside down (as he so often does, this s'mikhah rabbi) and he invites them. He forces the decision back on them.

Such was the electricity in Jesus' personality that he attracted crowds. People jammed into tiny homes, sat on window ledges, even came through the roof to be near him. Everywhere Jesus went a kind of party occurred. Sometimes even he himself provided food and wine. His first followers went along with him in the expectation of finding him the messiah but as they waited for the confirmation of this expectation, they were held to him by the force of his character, by what we have come to call charisma. But Jesus never presented himself as the Messiah, despite what John the Baptist appeared to be saying. 'Who do men say that I am?' he asked his disciples, deflecting the common hope. He had

come to displace people's conception of God, but the people found it hard to give up their inherited view of God.

Even his closest friends often couldn't come to terms with him. Once he had to say to Philip, the one who actually brought Nathaniel into the Jesus circle, 'Have I been so long with you and you still haven't got to know me?' But it was the personal relationships that bound the disciples to him: 'I have called you friends', Jesus once commented.

There were three things that undergirded his ministry. He represented grace, kindness that made people feel they were accepted for themselves; he represented truth because of his transparent and fearless honesty; and he represented authority loaned to him by his rabbinic qualification and his magnetic masterfulness.

A bonding of discipleship gradually formed, especially in those he first called, Simon, Andrew, James and John. This linkage advanced by gradual stages and didn't become fixed into the form of apostleship until these men had been given considerable opportunity to become intimately acquainted with their s'mikhah rabbi.

So how is it when Jesus calls us? What did we know about him before he called us? Perhaps we had Christian parents, many of us, we attended Sunday School, Christian Endeavour and Bible Class, many of us. What did we know about Jesus? We knew he loved little children, we knew he told stories that we came to call parables, we knew he was cruelly beaten by Roman soldiers and died on a cross for our sins (though some of us wondered what that really meant), we knew that he visited the disciples in an upper room after he'd died and we knew he was our friend and saviour and he had defeated death. And there were others to whom the call came later in life. Perhaps their immediate lives seemed to lack something and they were looking for certainties beyond themselves and thought the beliefs of a church community might provide them. What did they feel they had to know about Jesus?

What do we know about Jesus now? We know he was prepared to change his mind, we know he had had a clear view of the proper place of women in the world, we know he was the Word that became flesh and dwelt among us, we know he had no fear of establishment figures, we know he was the human face of God.

Of course there are those who are content with what they've carried from childhood about the life and meaning of Jesus. For them, that's fine. If that's what gives them peace in their lives and hope for their futures, that's fine. There is a sense, however, that on the

other hand they may never begin to plumb the real depths of belief, never get to know anything of the infinity of Jesus.

We learn about him in all the circumstances of our lives. In experiences like the birth of a child, that joy may open us to an awareness that we have never known before. When the skies grow dark and the clouds begin to gather, there is a glow in the figure of Jesus that comforts us and we sense the arms of God around us. When hope seems it is about to desert us, Jesus stands with us. Even in our day to day existence we have glimpses of God in the ordinary. That's a kind of knowing that is beyond price.

But there's a terrible thought lurking here. There's a questioning voice insinuating itself into our consciousness: 'Have I been so long with you, Margaret, or Lionel or Peggy or Ian, and you still haven't got to know me?'

So what about these fishermen, these four at the lakeside? Why did they decide to follow Jesus? Was it a desire for power? If this rabbi was really the Messiah come to throw off the Roman yoke and establish the Kingdom of God on earth, then they'd better get with the strength. Or was it a mark of respect for John the Baptist who seemed to be telling them that this was the Son of God? Or was there something about Jesus' style that made them stop and think about the world they barely understood, the world of the spirit? People of all types were drawn to him, the thoughtful Nicodemus, the woman at the well, a tax collector, the mentally ill. Or was it even a revelation from God? Most of these are legitimate reasons: some of them are not. But together they all set these disciples on a journey in which they would find themselves used by God in a profound way.

Not only were they fairly ordinary (like us, in fact), but they were also certainly imperfect. They stumble, fumble and bumble behind Jesus proving that over and over again they have very little idea of who Jesus was and where he was taking them. Yet this is how God works in the world. It is how God has always worked.

Likewise, Jesus comes into this world making all things new, creating, recreating, reordering, ushering in the Kingdom. He teaches and heals, welcomes and includes, defends and forgives, turns water into a lot of wine and a small basket of food into a great feast, all as signs of that Kingdom.

I don't really know why Simon, Andrew, James and John followed Jesus. I don't know if they hated smelling of fish all day. The gospel account doesn't tell us why but apparently they weren't hard to convince. Jesus just said, 'Come with me', and they did. Life is too

short and too busy to waste time on a God who hasn't captured our hearts, minds and souls. In a time of scary changes and transitions, this is what we are offered. 'Come with me'.

In a blog in memory of Marcus Borg, one of his theological colleagues put it like this:

'The calling of Jesus to the first disciples was not simply to be nice and to love everyone. They could have easily done this while remaining on their boats and catching their fish. Instead, they heard Jesus and immediately got up and followed him. In just a few short weeks they began to go out and touch the untouchables, teach the people deemed to be unteachable, stay in the homes of the so-called sinners and break bread with all who were hungry, especially those who were on the fringes of society. The call to action, the call of Jesus is not necessarily one of quiet kindness or one of allegiance to dogma. Instead it is a vocal proclamation to change the world as we know it. To turn imbalanced systems of power upside down, offering freedom to all'.

Jesus isn't going to lead us around but to lead us through. He's not going to lead us around but lead us through the heartbreak of separation, not lead us around but lead us through the impotence of loneliness, not lead us around but lead us through the confusion of our futures. Jesus promises us not to lead us around the cross but to lead us through it. And we with the disciples have no way of knowing what lies in those three words with which Jesus calls us: 'Come with me'.

Dr Ian Hansen, 21 January 2018