

Send Me: Sermon Preached at St John's, Devizes, Sunday 5th February 2022 (The Fourth Sunday before Lent)

Readings – Isaiah 6: 1–8; Luke 5: 1–11

'And I said, 'Here am I; send me!''

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I think it would be fair to say that as a congregation, we don't think of ourselves as being pious or particularly holy. In fact, that sort of understanding of what being a Christian means rather freaks us out – and thank the Lord for that. In my experience, we tend to see ourselves as pilgrims on the road towards God, travelling as much with those outside our walls as within them, and certainly not as some sort of vanguard of God's chosen people. That understanding is also big part of how I see my ministry as a priest.

We are nothing special. We have the same failings as anyone else. And yet we are chosen by God to follow Him, each of us as individuals, and collectively as His people here in the centre of Devizes, worshipping the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in this building as people have done for 892 years. It is awe-inspiring to think that the people who built St John's in the decades after William had conquered were closer in time to us today than they were to Peter and James and John on the shore of the Sea of Galilee when they left everything and followed Him. Yet across these vast gulfs of time, we are all joined together in the chain of those who have broken bread and shared wine in Jesus' name that stretches back, unbroken, to group of friends who shared supper with Him on an early Spring evening in Jerusalem, just before His death.

It is not, my brothers and sisters, because we are particularly good that we follow Jesus Christ but because the God who is love calls us to follow Him, as the people we are, and as the community of Christians here in St John's that we are.

God has always chosen people who didn't think they were anything special. Isaiah, when he was granted a vision of heaven, cried that he was a man of unclean lips. Still remembered as a thinker and wise counsellor after 2,700 years, from a time when very few names survive except for those of warriors and kings, Isaiah was nonetheless a man well aware of his own limitations.

Dear old Peter, never a man who failed to say what he meant, was entirely freaked out when he realised who Jesus was and what He had just done shouting, "Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man!" Our modern presentation of Jesus Christ rightly focuses on Him as our loving brother, but we have lost something of this sense of awe at the majesty of the Holy and Undivided Trinity.

This awe-inspiring God is calling everyone in this church this morning to speak for Him, to serve Him, to be fishers of men. "Here I am – send me", says Isaiah, in full awareness of his failings. God's question to Isaiah, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" is addressed to each one of us.

That is overwhelming, even frightening. Yet God knows that we are all limited – by the restrictions on our freedom that come with youth, or by the physical limitations of age; by the demands of work or study that good Christian citizenship imposes on us, or the demands of our care for those who depend on us for their sustenance and well-being. We cannot all leave everything to follow Him: indeed, what many of us urgently need to leave behind are our fantasies of what a perfect life might look like, so we can live the life we have to its fullest. You have been made to serve God in a way that only you can; you will find peace and joy and your fullest possible life when you find where God needs you to be in the here and now.

So ask God to send you to do His work and then let down your nets for a catch beyond your wildest imaginings, like Peter and James and John on the Sea of Galilee. Remembering that your first duty is to do your job honestly as well as you can, let down your nets as teachers and beauticians, as soldiers and social

workers, as financial advisors and shop assistants. Let down your nets with your classmates in school or with your neighbours in your retirement flats. Let down your nets in your hobbies and your social circles and in the pub – that’s one of my favourite bits. Let down your nets here at Church when you meet newcomers and visitors. You don’t need years of theological training and you certainly don’t need to bore people with pious phrases that strike even you as a bit unctuous.

All you need to do is be prepared to say “yes” when someone asks you if going to Church means a lot to you; and then to explain why, if asked, in your own terms, with your own answers, because God called you to follow Him exactly as you are. There are many right answers, and God will supply the answers you need, if you trust Him and trust that He loves you.

Some of you have toiled through a long night of Church decline. “We have toiled all night and caught nothing”, the apostles said to Jesus. A clergy acquaintance recently bemoaned in a meeting that he had toiled for decades and never knowingly brought anyone to follow Jesus. This must chime with many of you. And yet Peter, exhausted, agrees, “if you say so, I will let down the nets.” Let them down one more time.

Others among you are exploring faith for the first time, or coming back to practising your faith after a long gap. Welcome to the Church, at a time of great fear and great promise. We all know that the times are changing, and the secular world is in a very unstable place. Certainties are being upended. The old order is passing away and many of us are unsure whom or what we can trust any more. In these frightening times, one thing you can trust is that the way of life Jesus Christ set out for us is life-giving and good.

Here’s one thing all of us can do, regardless of what we do in life or where we are in our journey of faith. Isaiah wrote about living not only being a man of unclean lips but of living “among a people of unclean lips”, a phrase that must surely resonate in our post-Truth world. We can all try to be people of truth,

knowing that this is a standard that we can only reach with the grace of God. By being people of truth, we can be a blessing to all.

For I think one thing we definitely do have right as a parish is that the Christian life is not about being a righteous remnant of the spiritually superior, but about being pilgrims on the road with our friends and neighbours both inside and outside these walls: for all people are called by God to serve Him, whether knowingly or unknowingly. But those of us gathered within these walls are called to open ourselves to being sent by Him, to go out into deep waters for Him and gather His bounty. For most of us, He will call us to stay where we already are physically and professionally, but to do new and different things for Him. That is genuinely frightening, but in a world that is in any case an unsettled and increasingly scary place, it the path that leads to new and full life.

Now to the only wise God our saviour, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen.