

Year A

Matthew 4:12-23

When I was preparing this morning's sermon before Christmas I had just watched a two part documentary on BBC2 called "Muslims Like Us". It was set in a house in York and was a fly on the wall documentary about a diverse group Muslims from around Britain who were going to live in the same building as each other for a week. The people were from different Islamic backgrounds, some Asian, some Nigerian, some European. Most were Sunni, but at least one was Shia.

There was an even mix of the sexes. The people were very different and their understandings of Islam varied greatly too. After a while watching, it became clear to me that it would be possible to make a programme called "Christians Like Us" and the characters would have their mirror images across both religions. I thought that the first programme was very good but that the second one was disappointing. It descended into a 'Big Brother' like in-house war which wasn't very instructive or edifying. But the first episode was interesting and especially the behaviour of one of the

housemates called Abdul who was sympathetic to the cause of the Islamic State. He genuinely believed that Allah, God, had made it clear in the Koran that non-Muslims' and even Shia Muslims' lives were dispensable. The other housemates rejected his views, some very forcibly so. I couldn't help but think that although I had never met a Christian who would advocate the taking of another person's life in the name of Christ, I did know Christians who would be happy to pronounce damnation on other people. The two stances are not that far apart. It got me thinking about the Gospel text today.

We have here yet another record of the calling of the first disciples. Remember this is another development in the series of epiphanies that are being brought to our attention at this time of year. We will look at the essence of this week's epiphany in a moment. But first a reflection on the nature of calling.

Rodger Nishioka recounts a story from his childhood. He wrote:

“When I was growing up, there were several rules in our home. One rule was there was no television while eating dinner. This rule was broken every Sunday evening, however,

because dad wanted to watch 'The Wild Kingdom'. It was a nature programme. For my Presbyterian minister father, each episode was a theological journey demonstrating to us all yet once again the wonders of God's creativity and imagination in the natural world. From the savannas of Kenya to the barrier reef in Australia to the jungles of Borneo, we ate together and watched with fascination as the host introduced new creatures and opened the world to us. One episode I remember fondly was about the elephant seals of Argentina. The show focussed on a mother and her seal

pup, who had just been born. Soon after birthing her baby, the mother, now famished, abandoned the pup on the shore so she could go feed in the rich waters off the coast. After feeding, she returned to a different part of the beach and began to call for her baby. Other mothers had done the same, and all had returned at a similar time; I remember thinking that they would never find one another. The camera then followed the mother as she called to her pup and listened for the response. Following each other's voices and scents, soon the mother and pup were re-united. The host explained that,

from the moment of birth, the sound and scent of the pup are imprinted on the mother's memory, and the sound and scent of the mother are imprinted in the pup's memory. This fascinated me especially when dad turned to me and said, 'You know, that's how it is with God. We are imprinted with a memory of God, and God is imprinted with a memory of us, and even if it takes a lifetime, we will find each other.'"¹

We need to listen, to allow our heightened senses to perceive God and then to receive him when he finds us. Abdul, the Muslim

¹ Bartlett and Brown Taylor 2010 *Feasting on the Word Year A Volume 1* Westminster John Knox Press

extremist, in the house needed to learn to listen again and so often do we in case we begin to hear a distorted message.

Here, today, there is an epiphany moment as Jesus announced what he was all about. The location of the announcement is also part of the epiphany. Jesus was announcing his intention from the fringes; from the edges of the Jewish order, within range of the Gentile world and by implication therefore involving the Gentile world, the whole world. For some of the Muslims in the television programme I have referred to today it would come as a complete shock that God would

have any interest beyond the Islamic world. In much the same way it would have come as a shock to many of the Jews in Jesus' day that God would have any interest beyond Israel. And sometimes for Christians it comes as a shock that God has any interest beyond the concerns of the Church. But he does, emphatically, as we listen to his son calling out from the edges. And what did he proclaim? Well, he didn't even mention the church - "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." Now with the mention of the word 'heaven' we have got to be very careful. We have been so influenced by the

notion that our goal in life is to leave this world and to exist in a disembodied state in a heavenly idyll. It has been preached countless times through the history of the church to the extent that it has shaped some parts of the church. It is interesting that those churches which are particularly resistant to social action in the world are often those churches which teach that our goal is to escape from the world to heaven. However, the New Testament makes no mention of such teaching and so it is best to reject it and turn to what Jesus said about the kingdom of God or as here in Matthew's

Gospel, the kingdom of heaven; nothing to do with heaven as a notional, otherworldly place. The kingdom of heaven in Matthew's Gospel directly equates to the kingdom of God in the other Gospels. It always refers to the rule of Christ and never to a place. And the kingdom is concerned with the here and now. It is concerned with the state the world has got itself into and how that might begin to be put right. That's why we pray every week; "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Right at the heart of the ministry of Jesus is a longing for things to be put right now. As I was

preparing this sermon the poor people of Aleppo, bombed out of their homes under constant threat from evil all around were offered a chance of escape. Can you imagine saying to them, 'Oh, don't worry, you can embark on that journey another time. Why don't you take time now to prepare yourselves by visiting your Mosques or your churches!' No! the time for action is now. Seize the day! Get going for there is no time to be lost. The image of the elephant seal seeking out her pup and the urgency of that action for the future of the pup mirrors the urgency of Jesus' epiphany moment today.

This is a message for the whole world. This is a message that only makes sense if it is lived out by the faithful for the sake of the poor people of the world.

Oswald Golter was a missionary in northern China during the 1940's. After ten years service he was returning home. His ship stopped in India, and while waiting for a boat home he found a group of refugees living in a warehouse on the pier. Unwanted by anyone else the refugees were stranded there. Golter went to visit them. As it was Christmas-time wished them a merry Christmas and asked them what they would like for Christmas.

“We’re not Christians,” they said. “We don’t believe in Christmas.”

“I know,” said the missionary, “but what do you want for Christmas?” They described some German pastries they were particularly fond of, and so Oswald Golter cashed in his ticket, used the money to buy baskets and baskets of the pastries, took them to the refugees, and wished them a merry Christmas.

When he later recounted the incident to a class, a student said, “But sir, why did you do that for them? They weren’t Christians. They don’t even believe in Jesus.”

“I know,” he replied, “but I do!”

We believe today therefore we have kingdom responsibilities. Let’s fulfil these responsibilities joyfully.