

'How will we answer?'

Cathedral Eucharist, 10:00 am, Sunday 14th January, 2018

2nd Sunday Epiphany, Yr B

Sermon by the Rev'd Dr Mike Kirby, Priest-Vicar (SSM), Chester Cathedral

1 Samuel 3:1-10; Mark 3:7-12

May I speak now in the name of God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
Amen

How will we answer; how will we answer? I've been very fortunate throughout my whole professional career to travel to different parts of the world talking, discussing and disseminating the work I have had the privilege and the pleasure to be involved with – all for advancing our medical and scientific techniques for treating our patients. One notable year, back in 1993, my work was novel enough that my boss and I took it to Japan, Australia, Switzerland and here in the UK. Naturally enough, my boss got the trips to Japan, Australia and Switzerland – I went to Brighton and London! But I did get to New Orleans later that year, so I wasn't quite that hard done by! But I have been so fortunate in going to some wonderful places around the world, answering the call of my science.

And those opportunities were there in the very earliest days of my career when, years before studying for my doctorate, I had the opportunity to go to Jerusalem. My colleague and I had a great trip – and the scientific conference was good too! But it was the opportunity to see Israel, the Holy Land that was truly remarkable; eye opening. Yes, we travelled as impoverished students, but that perhaps made it the more real – we weren't on the tourist trail; most

of the time we were on the normal traveller routes, camping in the hill country. One of many endearing memories was the scene of our gospel reading today – that of Lake Galilee. It was amazing; amazing to now have in mind whenever I read the gospels, a real picture of what it is like out there. For us, we were camping on the eastern shore of the Lake; amazing. The writings in scripture of how the lake can suddenly change from a flat, calm, beautiful millpond into a frightening tempestuous body of water are absolutely true, as we experienced one evening sitting beside the lake. It is a spiritual place indeed; except when our early morning alarm call was the sound of helicopter gunships cruising over the Golan Heights. But many parts are natural gathering places, natural amphitheatres – and one can imagine Jesus going out into the lake in a simple fishing boat, to talk to the crowds gathering on the shoreline; to hear the words of this amazing man; this Son of God.....for his words, his spirit, his power of healing.

We went to many places – the shores of the Mediterranean in the North East, through Nazareth and Galilee, Jerusalem, Bethlehem and the Dead Sea too. We went by coach – and that took long enough. In our gospel we hear of people travelling equally far, but I suspect by vastly more inferior transport. They came from around the North West regions Tyre and Sidon; from the central regions of Judea and Jerusalem; from the south of Idumea; and from the east across the Jordan. All told, journeys of about 50 to over 100 miles – just to hear Jesus. The call within themselves to see and hear this man, on the shores of this Lake in the countryside, were so so strong; to hear his power, and feel it. To engage with a word of hope and salvation; and indeed salvation in the fullest sense – healing physically and spiritually.

Mark, even though his Gospel is one which is short and often rushes along through the stories, here he brings back a summary of Jesus's ministry – as healer, as restorer, as Messiah. His popularity and success are re-emphasised; and so too is the Markan motif of not revealing his true identity. The word is not to reveal his true identity as the Son of God just yet; the timing is not quite right....that for Mark will be revealed in both agony and glory at the time of Jesus' crucifixion; his death on the cross – for us.

But what strikes me is that calling; people hear about the power of this man, this divine man – and they travel for miles in hope of healing....but possibly beyond the physical aspects of their ailments and diseases. They feel called to go and see; to experience; to be there. They respond by travelling from across the country, to crowd on the shoreline for this one man. The shoreline isn't extensive, it isn't vast – so the crowding would have been immense; the danger of being overwhelmed, with their backs to the sea for Jesus and his disciples, was very real. But Jesus too is called, and his disciples – to be there among the peoples, in this instance around Lake Galilee. But perhaps one of the most striking things when you are actually out there is that – you are out there; you are in the country of the people in the first place. Jesus' ministry wasn't just in the Temples and synagogues; it wasn't where people would normally congregate and gather....it was out amongst where the people were. Jesus went out, called to his own ministry to do the will of the Father...amongst the people; the disciples were sent out too.....to be amongst the people to be the bringers of Good News; the Good News that Jesus both taught and displayed through his words and his actions. Yes, he went and cured many; all wanted therefore to touch him. But I suspect his very self, the way he spoke, acted, loved was also one of

the main characteristics that drew people to him, that called to the hearts and souls of so many.

In our old testament reading we encounter once again the very real call of Samuel; as he is about to enter a new phase of his own ministry. We are told that in this early time, the young boy Samuel did not yet know the Lord and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him...so it is natural that he thinks the voice he hears in the night is that of his master Eli; little does he know that the call will be to become and act as God's own mouthpiece. Eli, having spent years serving the Lord, recognises that this call is not for him, but for the boy.....it is his time to empower the boy to act and respond faithfully to the call.....here am I; speak Lord, your servant is listening.

So what is our answer to be; for we are called continuously, in both the ways that we have heard in the scriptures today. We are called, like Samuel, individually.....to be ourselves; distinctive, strange, true – as Rowan Williams often describes it. The vocation is to be ourselves – discerning what that is is the tricky part. But the call is personal – to you and I. How will we answer? Will we respond, eagerly and willingly as the young Samuel did? Will we encourage others to respond, when we discern a call for someone else – and do so gladly for their gifts, their talents, their own distinctiveness, perhaps ahead or instead of ours? Will we take the risk – as the multitude did, travelling miles and miles, on what was hearsay, stories and rumours that they had heard – but willing to take the risk to come to the Messiah, for healing....healing which we all need, for that is the definition of salvation. A healing which might bring us spiritually closer to God, to come back to being one with God....something which we all inwardly yearn. How will we answer?

Part of the answer is clear, the numerical power is clear – we do as Jesus did in going out amongst the people; to the shorelines of where they are. That is for all of us, as we go about our lives, each of us as a solitary missionary in a crowd of people who do not know of the tremendous life that faith brings above and beyond our own earthly, human abilities. It need not be a soapbox on a corner – but the quiet gentleness that Jesus took with him, to be himself, with that Spirit filled distinctiveness – a distinctiveness that we all have. A persona which says this is the love of Christ, by the way we serve; a Christian life and lifestyle that is reflected in us. It is not easy; it is something we need to keep on persevering with – but in full knowledge that God keeps on loving and is present on that shoreline of our lives, alongside us in our strong moments; carrying us in our weaker moments. God empowers us, in exactly the same way as Jesus was empowered, through the spirit, to respond to that call – but the key point is how will we answer?

My hopes and prayers are that as each day marks a new beginning, we all find ways to answer the calls to us; and that in this short time that I have had the pleasure, privilege and honour of responding to that call to be here with you, alongside you – that I have done so in always serving you, and ministering with you....in Jesus' name.

Amen