

1st February, 2015.

Reading: Mark 1: 14 - 20

Sermon: The Need for a Mind-Shift

I've decided to return to the theme of last week's sermon, at least in part, and that has come about because of an email I received on Friday from another minister.

The theme for last week came from the Church Review and had to do with outreach. The questions which I asked from the form provided for the review were: How do we share the Good News of Jesus Christ and how do we help people to become Christians? At the time I said that I wasn't sure that I could actually answer those questions, at least not in the way which I think is expected.

The minister, who sent me the email, received a sermon from another minister which gave him food for thought. He didn't send me a copy of the sermon - unfortunately - but just his comments on it so that I could comment on his comments, if that makes sense.

The sermon had been on Jesus' calling of the four fishermen to become His disciples which was our reading for last week and again for this week.

From the reading we know that Jesus said to the fishermen to leave their nets and to follow Him and that He would make them fishers of men. The question is, what does that mean?

Taken literally, there is very definitely a 'them' and an 'us' situation created. There are the catchers and the caught. We are the catchers or the fishers and those in the world, like fish, are unsuspecting of what is ahead of them, namely that we are out to catch them in our nets or to reel them in.

There is almost a sense in which we are out to trap people if we use the analogy of the net or even that of reeling people in. There is no escape once you're in that net or on that hook and there is certainly no choice once you're caught or once you bite.

That would make our outreach a bit sadistic and controlling, a bit like brainwashing, perhaps, which is definitely not what our faith advocates. That approach has nothing to do with love.

The reality is that there is no escape from God's greater presence in the world but we're not trapped, not like the fish. If things get caught in a

net or reeled in, the end result is the opposite of life which is what Jesus offers us. With that in mind, there has to be another way of interpreting what Jesus meant when he said that the fishermen would become fishers of men, if they followed Him.

It's also difficult to relate to people if we have in mind that they are simply there to be caught and reeled in. There has to be another way of looking at our calling and at the task before us. That is what the writer of the email was considering. What is the other way? What did Jesus actually mean?

What my colleague suggested in his email was that those people, those fishermen, had specific skills and interests relating to their occupation and each day, their minds were focussed on their job.

When Jesus invited them to follow Him, their job was going to be somewhat different. They were leaving their nets behind and they would no longer be focussing on things but on people and that would involve a mind-shift.

Analogies are never perfect but if you were the Chief Executive in a large hospital, your thinking would be different from that of the nurse in the ward. I can guarantee it. Your focus would be on budgets and value for money and numbers and targets and cuts but the focus of the nurse would hopefully be on the patient and on the needs of an individual as opposed to the needs of the whole 'business'.

If you were to change roles, inevitably your focus would shift and your thinking would change because you would no longer be dealing with figures but with people but hopefully, you would have skills which were transferable.

That was the kind of change which the fishermen faced. They were suddenly faced with people and their focus had to shift and their way of thinking had to change but they still had skills and interests which they could use. Their skills were transferable.

They would need patience when they were out fishing. They would need patience in their dealings with people. They would need to be willing to work unsocial hours when they were fishing so that they were at sea or on the lake when the time was appropriate. They would need that same willingness when working with and following Jesus. They would need to be able to work as part of a team on the boat. They would need to be able to work as part of a team as they shared with Jesus and the other disciples in

Jesus's ministry.

They would need to be able to listen to others and to adapt their plans and change course when the weather conditions or their situations changed. They would need to be able to listen if they were going to be working with Jesus. They couldn't throw their weight around and lay down the law. They would have to listen and they would have to be willing to adapt and change course, depending on the needs of the people with whom they were working. Their skills would be transferable but their way of thinking would have to alter.

Following Jesus and answering our call to service involves relating well to people and engaging with people and supporting people and implementing decisions which are made whether we are in agreement with everything that is decided or not because the decision is a team one.

If three out of four fishermen in the boat decide that the best fishing ground is x and one disagrees, the others have to listen to the reasons for the different opinion and if they are swayed, well and good. If not, the one who wanted to go elsewhere still has to pull his weight and catch fish in the place which has been decided. He can't opt out of his responsibility just because things didn't go his way. It is the same in the Session and ultimately in the congregation. When decisions are made, we all have a responsibility to carry those decisions through and to support what is happening, bearing in mind that the elders are elected by congregations to make decisions for the spiritual well-being of the congregation and parish.

The sermon began with reference to the questions asked in the Church Review. How do we share the Good News of Jesus Christ and how do we help people to become Christians?

I said last week that I wasn't sure if I could answer those questions but that was because often we think with the mind-set of the fishermen or of the Chief Exec. We think in terms of quotas, of numbers, of strategies and of plans whereas what we are actually called to do is to relate to people, to get alongside people wherever they are and in whatever situation they find themselves.

In some ways, that answer maybe doesn't fit the questions so maybe we are asking the wrong questions. If you ask me what I do, that I can answer. I talk to people and I listen to people. I try to get to know people and I try to be there when I'm needed. To what extent I achieve those things is for me to consider. Is that enough?

Well, the email I received seemed to rubber stamp my approach but maybe we need to go further. One thing is for sure, outreach can't be about trapping people in religious nets. That doesn't mean that we never talk about what we believe but we should do it in the context of relationships which we have built up.

We don't talk about marriage to someone we have just met. We don't talk about commitment to someone we hardly know. We don't have expectations of a long term relationship when we have only said 'hello' on the passing. We get to know someone and that person gets to know us and getting to know us is about getting to know what we like, what we do, where we go and what we believe. All of that grows out of our relationship with the other person.

Outreach has to be founded on relationships if we are talking about us all being part of God's family. A family is built on the relationships which each person has with the others.

If we welcome people as part of our family, we will hopefully treat them differently from people we consider to be there to be caught. There is no love involved in entrapment.

There is love involved in relationships and families which function well. Those families are built on love, on acceptance, on understanding and on forgiveness. In a family which functions well, there is also an openness with each other and a willingness to let the other family members live their lives and express themselves even if they do that in ways which are different from how we might express ourselves.

In terms of Church and worship, that maybe involves a change of mind-set. Maybe everyone doesn't need to worship the way we do it. Maybe there are alternative ways which would allow people to express themselves, their feelings, their beliefs more appropriately and more freely.

When we have a good relationship with someone and when we are in a trusting relationship with no hidden agenda, and when our faith is the foundation of our lives, it is not impossible to allow changes to happen. Nor is it impossible to engage in conversation about faith with those who are closest to us. They already know that our faith is part of who we are and as they share in our lives, perhaps they might wish to understand that part of our lives as well but with no hidden agenda. We are not about quotas despite the fact that each year we are asked to fill in a Statistical return. Figures interest those who run the business but at ground level, our

interest needs be in the individual.

Engaging with people can cause a mind shift in them when they have a proper understanding of where we are coming from and where we are headed and who knows where that will lead them.

We, however, all have skills which allow us to relate to people and to engage with people, on different levels, but to do that well, we have to focus on the job in hand and not be distracted by other agendas. Having been called and having been given the job of a fisher of men and women and boys and girls, we have a responsibility to use the skills we have which allow us to reach out to others in love and acceptance.