

Sunday 26th January 2020
Third Sunday of Epiphany (A)

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Isaiah 9.1-4

NT: I Corinthians 1.10-18

G: Matthew 4.12-23

I have finally got around to watching the film, The Two Popes. I can't say it ranks up there with Star Wars and I prefer Fr Fergus's synopsis of Frankie and Benny running a pizza stall, but it was watchable.

Jonathan Pryce rather shone as Pope Francis, while Anthony Hopkins as Pope Benedict seemed only one step removed from Hannibal Lector. Benedict was portrayed as a man who apparently courted greatness and wanted to take on the role of supreme leadership which came with a guarantee of infallibility, only to discover that with great privilege comes great responsibility, that you cannot have the Resurrection without the Cross.

None of us can truly know what private conversations took place and continue to take place between these two men but the fact that, for whatever reason, Benedict decided to stand down as Pope remains, for me personally, a difficult one to justify.

It reminded me of the story of St Peter fleeing Rome and persecution. On his way out of the city, he meets the Risen Jesus on his way into Rome. Peter asks, 'Quo Vadis Domine?' Where are you going Lord? And Jesus replies 'To Rome to be crucified a second time.' Peter immediately turns round and goes back to face the persecution and his own crucifixion.

Once we have been called, we cannot be 'uncalled'. Once you are given significant information, you are unable to forget it and not act upon it. Once you have encountered Jesus, you cannot turn your back and go on with the life you used to have. Everything is changed whether you welcome this change or not.

The same was true for Jesus himself. Today's gospel begins *Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested*. From the beginning, Jesus knew that his ministry would lead to his own personal hardship and suffering, that he would not be feted as a great Teacher and Ruler, that in human terms he would appear to fail. But his trust was in the Father and his heart was filled with love for all humanity. So he purposely took himself to *the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, to the people who walk in darkness* and there Jesus determined to begin his public ministry, to teach about the kingdom of God, to bring a great light, *to shine the knowledge of the glory of God*.

And he began by calling the two sets of brothers who would be his closest friends and followers, Peter and Andrew, James and John. When they left their nets and went with Jesus, these men could have had no idea of what lay ahead. They gave up everything because in Jesus they had found a pearl of great price, they had found someone who brought a light and love beyond all understanding. They each came with their strengths and failings, their beliefs and doubts, their determination and reluctance.

Peter, impetuous and wavering. Who denied Jesus and yet was the rock on which Jesus chose to build his Church. Peter, opened his heart and became transformed by the power of the Holy

Spirit. Peter, who according to tradition was crucified upside down because he said he was not worthy to die in the same way as Jesus.

Andrew who always appears in the gospel to be a steady, sensible person who according to John's gospel was a disciple of John the Baptist and one of the first followers of Jesus, telling his brother Peter that he had found the Messiah. When the Greeks approach Philip and say that they want to see Jesus, it is to Andrew that Philip turns for help. According to tradition, Andrew was crucified on an X shaped cross, the saltire you see on the Scottish flag, because he too said he was not worthy to die in the same manner as Jesus.

James, who along with his brother John, was nicknamed by Jesus, Boanerges, the Sons of Thunder, who seems a formidable character, who wanted to call down destruction on a village that had dismissed Jesus. James who became the first bishop of Jerusalem and who taught with authority as illustrated by his letter in the New Testament, a letter relevant to all parishes today.

James was beheaded in 44AD on the orders of Herod, the first apostle to be martyred. Thousands of people each year make the pilgrimage to his shrine in Northern Spain, Compostela di Santiago.

John who termed himself 'the disciple that Jesus loved', who was called to record his experience of life with Jesus through his gospel. John who through his writings showed that he was consumed with his love for his Lord. John who remained faithful to the end as he stood beneath the cross of Christ and who received the mother of Jesus to be his own mother.

John who seemed to be indestructible despite all the ways his enemies tried to kill and who finally died in old age, having tirelessly preached of the love of God all his long years.

These were four of the people that Jesus called to follow him. Four people who were caught up in a love which led them to a life they could never of dreamt of as fishermen on the banks of Galilee.

This is the invitation that each of us has answered or we wouldn't be here in church today.

In the words of the John Bell hymn

Will you come and follow me
If I but call your name?
Will you go where you don't know
And never be the same?
Will you let my love be shown,
Will you let my name be known,
Will you let my life be grown
In you and you in me?

This is the exciting journey that we have been called to share with our Lord and we should let nothing distract us from this intention.

I know that many people have been hurt and angered this week by the supposedly pastoral message from the House of Bishops on the subject of Civil Partnerships. It is also deeply frustrating to many clergy that while we work in the field and look to minister to those we labour with, others feel able to pronounce on situations they no longer have day to day dealings with.

Defining 21st century marriage by 17th century the Book of Common Prayer being a prime example. The point also seems to have been missed that different sex couples choosing Civil Partnership are doing so because they have no belief in marriage. Surely, this is where the Church should be focusing its energies, teaching on the strength and grace and blessing that the sacrament of marriage brings.

To those of you who are questioning if God is calling you to be here, if indeed you want to be here, I am sorry for your hurt but please be assured of God's love. Know for certain that God purposely created you to be the person that you are because there is a place in his Kingdom that you and only you can fill. And please believe this

*There's a wideness in God's mercy,
Like the wideness of the sea;
There's a kindness in His justice,
Which is more than liberty.*

*But we make His love too narrow
By false limits of our own;
And we magnify His strictness
With a zeal He will not own.*

Amen.

The Revd Michelle Montrose