

SERMON - 4/10/2009  
(ST JAMES' 8AM ONLY)

Text: Joshua 24:14-24  
Mark 1:14-20

Focus of text: Commitment to Christ

Purpose: To enter into the situation of the calling of the first disciples.

Title: What an offer!

Author: The Revd Peter Bengé

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May the word of God be spoken and heard. Amen.

Today is a special day in the life of our church as Bp Tom will be visiting to lead our 10am service.

He will be confirming three people, awarding Bishop's medals to three others, and awarding choir ribbons to a number of our younger choir members.

Those things will not be happening at this service, but we will share with the 10am service the theme of commitment, which is appropriate to both of our Bible readings today.

I will focus in my sermon on the calling of the disciples, which we find in our Gospel reading.

Jesus walks along the shore of the Sea of Galilee and calls his first four disciples – Andrew, Peter, James and John – to follow him.

And Mark the Gospel writer tells us that Peter and Andrew, James and John, all followed him “immediately”. That immediately has often made me wonder.

Some commentators say that because Mark was not a great writer, he used to liven up his narrative by making things happen ‘immediately’.

“Immediately this happened and immediately that happened”, and a bit of energy is injected into the story. Or did they know Jesus beforehand, and this was their ultimate response to Jesus' preaching?

On this day, because of all they knew about him, they followed him immediately.

As far as I can remember, that's the line taken by Lloyd C. Douglas in his book ‘The Big Fisherman’, which I must have read some 30 years ago.

But recently I came across another possible reason for the immediate response of these disciples, which I thought made excellent sense, and I want to tell you about it.

It has its basis in the Jewish culture of Jesus' day.

In Jesus' day the most highly respected position an ordinary person could hold was the position of rabbi – a person who taught and lived out adherence to God's law.

Children were taught the law of Moses – the Pentateuch or first 5 books of the Bible – at school.

The children started at school at the age of 6 and by the age of around 10 the vast majority of them would have memorised the Pentateuch word for word.

This was the first level of Jewish education – *beth sefer* – and of course that was for boys only.

Many of the young boys would drop out sometime during this process, being apprenticed normally in their father's trade or having to assist with labouring as a means of supporting their family.

Many people in those days were living at a subsistence level, so they just could not afford to keep their sons at school.

But for those who did continue through to the end – the best of them would have been invited to attend the second level of schooling – *beth talmud*.

These best students would have gone on to learn by heart the whole of the Hebrew Bible – our Old Testament – and of course to study it thoroughly as well.

By the age of 14 or 15, they would have finished this second level of education, and would already have been distinguished in that society by their level of learning.

Most of them would then have gone on to be apprenticed to their fathers in various kinds of employment.

But the best of them – the best of the best – would have been able to go even further, and to be apprenticed not to their fathers, but to a rabbi.

This third level of learning was known as *beth midrash*, where a young man became the disciple of a rabbi.

A disciple was no longer just a student, an academic learner.

A disciple was someone who did what the rabbi did, someone who was being apprenticed as a rabbi.

The disciple's aim was to be as close to the rabbi as possible in order to become like him.

And so he would apply to a rabbi to be taken on as a disciple and the rabbi would interview him.

And as a result of that interview, the rabbi might decide that the young man simply did not meet the standard required, and he would dismiss that young man and tell him to seek other employment.

But if a young man was really outstanding in his promise, the rabbi might accept the applicant and allow that young man to join his disciples, his followers.

So only the best of the *beth sefer* students would be accepted into *beth talmud*.

Only the best of those best would seek to be discipled to a rabbi.

And only the best of the best of the best would be accepted as a rabbi's disciple, someone who would qualify one day to become a rabbi in his own right.

So it is no surprise in a society that so highly valued sacred learning and the practice of righteousness, that rabbis and their disciples were highly revered, highly respected.

Now just picture in your minds that Jesus, the rabbi whose fame is spreading in Galilee, comes up to four fishermen, who probably never made it to the end of the first level of schooling.

And he says to them 'follow me', which is the way that a rabbi would have invited someone to become his disciple.

Jesus was asking totally ordinary people, who were no more learned or qualified than others, who didn't know a great deal about the Bible and had never been trained in rabbinic reasoning, to apprentice themselves to him. And their immediate and emphatic response was, 'Yes!' 'Immediately they left their nets and followed him.'

This doesn't seem to me like exaggeration any more. It doesn't seem like a technique to increase the excitement of the narrative.

We don't have to guess at the nature of their pre-existing relationship with Jesus.

What we have is Jesus the rabbi saying to those ordinary people, 'you can be like me.'

'You can do what I do.'

And so they say yes at once and without reserve.

Imagine that Jesus came up to you.

And you know what sort of person Jesus is, the holiness that he exhibits, the wisdom and love that he displays.

And he says to you, 'You can do what I do.'

You can be like me.

You qualify in my eyes to be my disciple'.

What's your response to that?

Jesus is calling you to be like him, to live close to him, to do what he does.

And we know that Jesus is God in human form.

What is your response?

We often think that we initiate something in our relationship with God but when we look at it more deeply we realise that God is really always the initiator.

It's God who gives us the grace and ability to respond to him.

So here it's Jesus' commitment to the disciples, who were just ordinary people, it's his commitment that calls them into commitment to him.

And similarly, God in Jesus has chosen us who are just ordinary people, and who in no way deserve to be singled out.

He has chosen us, expressed his commitment to us who are far from deserving it, so that we might respond with commitment to him.

We need a sense of God's grace towards us, that huge and amazing grace that stooped down to us and brought us eternal life through a relationship with Jesus.

If we have a real sense of God's grace towards us, of God's commitment to us in Jesus, then our level of commitment will cease to be an issue.

God has willingly given his life to us in Jesus.

We will willingly give our lives to him in return.