

3rd Sunday of Year

Today we hear Jesus call four fishermen to leave their nets: “follow me and I will make you fishers of men.” I don’t think it an accident that these four were fishermen. Our Lord’s choices often contain a message. When he calls the tax collector Matthew it symbolises how he has come to call sinners to repentance. He will now apply his money-making and administrative skills in a new way. Ultimately he will have the responsibility of producing an account of the life and teachings of Jesus through writing his Gospel. In the same way the invitation to become ‘fishers of men’ is more than just a catch-phrase to attract Simon, Andrew, James and John. It expresses a truth about how the Good News is to be spread and people brought to Christ. It cannot be a solitary venture. It demands co-operation. Fishermen work as a team. One person cannot manage a boat and net by himself. Think of the miraculous catch of fish when Simon Peter has to call his friends to help land the catch. Even the net provides a metaphor. Its strength and flexibility comes from many strands knotted together. Tears need mending or the net loses its strength and impairs its work.

Today falls within the Octave of Prayer for Christian Unity. I would like to reflect on what this image of fishing for men has to say to us in this context. This time of prayer was introduced over a century ago and timed to coincide with the Feasts of the Chair of St Peter in Rome (18th January) and of the Conversion of St Paul (25th January). We can look back and ask what has been achieved over 100 years – after all the different Churches are not yet in full Communion with each other, and over that time many new groups have formed especially within the Evangelical and Pentecostal traditions. There have been convergences and greater mutual understanding with regard to some of the disagreements that arose in the Sixteenth Century over the nature of justification by Faith and of the Eucharist. On the other hand new tensions have arisen over the truth of the Scriptures and moral issues such as abortion, euthanasia and sexual conduct.

However, those who are of an age to remember how things were fifty years ago will be aware of just how far attitudes have changed. When the Queen was crowned, the Archbishop of Westminster was accommodated on the steps of Westminster Abbey since neither Church would have allowed him inside to participate. At school assemblies Christians stayed behind Catholics and Jews went outside. Such attitudes have not entirely disappeared. However, we know that on the ground the Churches within our community enjoy friendly relationships and can work together despite our disagreements.

This is not simply a matter of joint prayer or services, whether during Unity Week or at other times. It is a matter of joint witness. A concrete example of this is how the Churches in Coggeshall and Tiptree have come together to provide a full time youth worker, not just for children already involved in the Churches, but the much larger group of young people who have no religious affiliations and are struggling to find support and meaning in life. We are not doing this simply to entice them into the Church buildings but to help them understand how much God loves and cares about them. It is a network based on Christ. On a smaller scale we have started a youth group in Kelvedon. I would encourage you to support these efforts first of all by prayer. Currently both youth worker posts are vacant and the two trusts are exploring how best to carry the work forward. In the longer term there is always a need for voluntary support in running the groups they may start and also for fundraising. The salary and pension costs for a full time youth worker are about £30K per annum.

What other ways are open to us? There is the food bank but also other avenues such as the Oasis bookshop and café in Tiptree or The Lighthouse in Tollesbury. There may be other needs in the community that you are aware of and where a Christian input could make a difference. Our first two readings remind us that whatever the time scale of God’s overall plan, for us as individuals time is passing and each day spent away from the Lord is a day wasted.