

### ***Gathering in Love***

One of the things that most struck me when I first read the profile for St Peter's, was the clear statement of the parish's mission and purpose. I read the statement that we are "Gathering in Love, Growing in Faith, Giving Hope to All", and I was impressed by the sense that here's a church that knows what it's about, what it is seeking to do. That strapline, which is summarised across lots of our communications, in the shorthand of "Faith, Hope, Community" has been around a bit, and you discerned it and arrived at it, in a very different context.

I've been here three months now. We've moved through the waiting of Advent, and the celebrations of Christmas and Epiphany, and now we're into ordinary time. Over the next three weeks, before we turn our attention to Lent, I'd like us to start a conversation about how we think afresh about those mission priorities in our present context. It's a conversation that we'll be having as the PCC and as the wider congregation, about how we order our life together at this moment. We need to be thinking and praying together about how we respond to God's call to us as the church now, and how we discern the shape of our vision into the future.

This morning's gospel reading brings to the surface themes of call and gathering. We hear Luke's account of Jesus calling Simon to follow him, and calling James and John too. We hear of the miraculous catch of fish. This is a story that we find elsewhere in the Gospels, in John's accounts of the resurrection appearances. Those who gather as God's people in response to Christ's call do so as Easter people, in light of the resurrection.

We hear Jesus call Simon Peter to follow him, and tell him "from now on you will be catching people". Simon's response to Jesus's call echoes that we heard in the Old Testament account of the call of the prophet Isaiah. Here we have the very famous, programmatic call narrative which provides the pattern for so much vocational response: first, the to-be-prophet recognises his own sinfulness and inadequacy, and then he responds "Here am I; send me."

But when Jesus tells Simon that he will, from henceforth, be catching people, he offers reassurance – "Do not be afraid". This phrase echoed through the early chapters of Luke: "Do not be afraid" says Gabriel to Mary, "you have found favour with God"; "Do not be afraid" says the angel to the shepherds, "for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy...". And now, "do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." Neither need we be afraid; because the one who calls and sends us is God, who is faithful and will equip us for the work he is calling us to do.

When we gather as God's church, we are gathering in response to that call. And we gather in God's name. We begin our worship by saying we meet "In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." That isn't just church-speak for "Good morning". Rather, it is a statement about who we are, and in whose name we gather. We gather intentionally as the Church, trusting that Christ is here in the midst of us. And when we say we're gathering in love, it is *God's* love in which we gather, as members together of Christ's body.

So we gather in love, intentionally, as God's church in this place. And why do we gather?

First of all, we gather for worship. That is the primary thing Christians do when they meet together – since earliest days Christians have gathered to read Scripture, to pray, and to break bread together. We gather to worship the one who has called us into relationship with him, and with one another.

But we also gather for fellowship: that might be for social gatherings – the Women’s Fellowship tea that happened on Monday, a coffee morning, whatever – for things that build community and friendship; or it might be for prayer, for study, or nurture.

So reflecting on the pattern and purpose of our gatherings will lead us into a conversation about growing, about how we grow in faith, and about how we help others to gather with us – for all those different reasons. To do that we will need to reflect on our cultures and habits of invitation and welcome. As our conversations develop it will lead us into future conversations about where, when, and how some of our gatherings might take place. How are we present as God’s church across the whole of the parish? How are we going to gather as the Church in the bits of the parish where the houses haven’t been built yet? As we explore those questions, we will be reflecting on the third part of our mission statement, about what we mean when we talk about “Giving hope to all”.

These are big questions, and this is only the start of the start of a conversation. They are big questions but we need not be afraid of them: Christ is calling us today, as he called our patron St Peter on the shores of Galilee; he sends us with work to do, but with the assurance that we need not be afraid. God who calls us is faithful. We gather in his name and in his love, as his people in this place, and then are sent out to witness to that love and to his resurrection.