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Epiphany 5C

Sermon notes on Luke 5.1-11

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The story of the call of the disciples must be one of the more terrifying passages of the New Testament: "...When [the fishermen] had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed Jesus" (Luke 5.11). If this is intended to demonstrate what it is like to be a Christian, it is a very hard word for people like most of us to hear. Yet it is *Jesus* who makes the call; and we have heard it – some of us – scores or hundreds of times. To be free to follow – although we romanticise it hopelessly – would this not be a great thing? And yet, again, we know that we are not free, at least in the way that the disciples seem to be in the story.

But still we do not despair. For we can *rationalise* their response to Jesus. Perhaps they heard him many times before and it is just that it is *this* time, after a long period of reflection, that they happened to put everything down and follow him. Or perhaps it was their understanding of the nature of the world which made the difference. You would be much more likely to drop everything and follow the prophet of the impending doom if you believed that the world was soon coming to an end. Or perhaps the fact that these men didn't have very much in the first place meant that it was easier for them to cast it all aside. With arguments like this we finally reach a comforting conclusion: while they *look* freer than we feel, in fact their situation and expectations were quite different from ours: there is no fair comparison to be made between them and us.

But it feels like this way of thinking simply denies the text of the Scripture as it stands. If we were supposed to understand that the disciples thinking ran in one of the ways I have just suggested we might expect that the scripture would say this, when in fact it doesn't. Instead of trying to explain away the actions of the disciples here we need to rethink what is going on by shifting our focus from our timid psychology to the theological centre of what happens when God meets the world in Christ.

It is our tendency to want to place conditions on our response to God's call. But, while we approach God with our terms and conditions, the church declares that God approaches us *unconditionally*. There is no calculation on God's part of achievement, no reckoning of debt or interest or repayment. Now, the question is: despite all of our attempts to rationalise our response to it, can the call to follow – when it

comes – also be a word of unconditional *grace*? When we try to rationalise our response to God's call, we demonstrate that we hear it only as law – as mere *demand*, and so as *bad* news. I suspect that this is *typically* how we approach the question of God, or God's questions to us. We hear a command – perhaps to follow Jesus – as bad news, and we seek to see whether, on balance, we can find any good news in it for ourselves; "balance" is what it all comes to be about.

But, the question is worth asking again: is the call of God a word of *grace* and not merely a demanding command? Church talk about God's "unconditional grace" is usually talk about *our* access to God, which God freely makes possible. But unconditional grace is not about *our* access to God – our freedom to find salvation; it is about *God's* freedom to find us. We may be saved by God's grace because there are no conditions which might separate the love of God in Jesus Christ from us, and so no conditions which God has to see met before he may heal us. God's ability to heal is simply a matter of his *choosing* to do so.

Now, if God is free to approach us to heal, he is also free to approach us to call; there are no conditions God needs to meet to call us to follow. So we must say not only the bit we like – that "by grace we are saved", but also what leaves us less settled: by grace we are *called* – the same grace as that by which we are saved.

And it *is* the same grace. To defend ourselves against God's freedom to make a claim on us is to deny that we are saved by grace. To say No to the call to obedience – whether it is obedience to drop everything and follow or simple obedience to God's "standing orders" – is to deny the salvation by grace we claim so strongly. To be startled by the call to follow but not by the declaration of forgiveness – this is not yet to be forgiven. To be uninspired by the direct call of God is to have become bored with his forgiveness.

To be called to follow, then – to be commissioned to "fish for people" – this is the *shape* of healing and forgiveness from God. There is no forgiveness which then seeks an action in response – looks for something to do – and actually might not get around to finding an action; the one who knows herself forgiven is the one who is free to respond to God's call.

"Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" cries the frightened Simon Peter after the great and unexpected haul of fish. But the decision of Simon to follow Jesus is the response of a confessed sinner who nevertheless is deemed fit for the service of God's unfolding kingdom. That is, Simon has received God's welcoming grace in the call to mission: *the commissioning to mission is the word of forgiveness*.

This is what we miss in our allergic reaction to the disciples' following Jesus so seemingly carelessly. "From now on you will fish for people" is not simply a task given to these disciples but the word of acceptance by God – the demonstration of forgiveness. What seems to us to be a careless and risky throwing away of their lives in launching after Jesus is in fact their taking up of the free offer of a share in God's healing work in the world, a healing which begins with their own being invited to participate.

In contrast, our own reality is too often that we freely embrace what we consider the gracious *gift* of God – his forgiveness – and quickly name as an *affliction* what we consider the unreasonable conditions of discipleship – to follow. There is no life, no real freedom to be found in this. We explain away the first disciples' response to Jesus at our own peril, for to save our ourselves from participation in God's mission to insulate ourselves from God's salvation. It is the call to mission which is the word of forgiveness; it is this call, and the forgiveness it entails, which we affirm today in our renewing of the covenant.

To turn our anxieties upside down here, we ought then to pray that God might afflict his people with such an experience of forgiveness that the freely-given gift of a share in his work in the world might be joyfully received by all.

Amen.