

Sunday 29th August 2021 – ‘A Call to action’ (Mark 1:14-20, Romans 12:4-13)

The last 18 months has been a season like no other in our lives. To many of us it feels like almost everything has changed. I must confess I tend to refer to things now as ‘BC’ i.e. Before Covid. It has been a *season of loss* – and not just in terms of losing people we knew and loved, in lots of other ways, too.

And even if we haven’t lost something tangible and precious, **all of have faced big changes: to our lifestyles, to work, to leisure, to shopping, to time with others**. We’ve absorbed changes to our vocabulary (‘bubbles’ are no longer the pretty things we’re forever blowing, for example), and even changes to our theology – it’s the first time in the history of the Church that we’ve taught people to love our neighbour by *not* seeing them – or, if we do, we keep our distance and cover our faces.

Of course, we have tried to love our neighbour by engaging them in different ways – phone calls, Zoom chats and Facetime online. So perhaps I exaggerate: but there is a kernel of truth there – and the sheer length of time this has all gone on means that it has changed us. Most of us are different people than we were 18 months ago – for some slightly, for others very. Indeed the people you worry most about are those who apparently *haven’t* changed, who want to pretend that all this hasn’t happened.

On the other hand, **there have also been unexpected blessings. Many things we took for granted were suddenly taken away, and we’ve rediscovered their true value** – in particular I think when it comes to our relationships. That comment about *not* seeing people had a flip side: many of us have practised a new intentionality in our relationships, we made more effort to keep in touch. Many of us previously might have thought about someone and said to ourselves: ‘no hurry, I’ll see them at church’... but when that was suddenly taken away, we adapted and started to go out of our way to call people and see how they were. Personally, I’ve been delighted to see how well we’ve looked after each other. As a result, I think our community life has deepened.

Or take our relationship to nature. Again, many of us have connected on a deeper level with the natural world around us than previously. Nature has been our joy and our safety valve, especially during the long, hard months of lockdown. We value it more than we’ve ever done.

As we gather today, it’s obvious we’re not out of woods yet – and none of us can presume what will happen over the autumn and winter; nevertheless, we’re also starting to face longer term questions. For the first time in 18 months we can see a possible path out of this, which means **we now have to face questions about the future** more than just a few days ahead: what sort of people have we become – and who do we want to be? What sort of community life do we want to have, and how are we going to achieve this? Specifically, how much do we want to be back in the same room with people, and what will stay online? And if we know that both elements will play a big part in our lives from now on, how will we make that sustainable? These are big questions for wider society – for example, employers with large half-empty offices. But also vitally important for us as a church.

The wonderful truth is that we’ve grown significantly during this season: there are hundreds watching our services online, and new ministries have formed reaching and connecting with those who can’t get to a church building anymore, and also connecting family members across the world. More schools have connected with us, and we’ve also seen new music, family and creative ministries. This is all to be celebrated!

There is also, of course, a lot of stuff we want to start again: Cafe Church, our Go4th ministry, community gatherings through coffee mornings, quiz nights, Open House and other events. During this time I think young families have possibly been the most affected and the most overlooked (and I want to recognise this and apologise to you directly if we haven't served you as well as others) – so it is one of our top priorities to restore high-quality provision for our amazing families and children.

How do we do all of that? How do we keep all those balls in the air? *If we really are a bigger church than we were, how are we going to live and act like a bigger church?*

We need you. I need you. This is the moment to say – it's time for many of us to get back in the game, in whatever ways we can. That will be different for different people, which is the glory of the church – for some it will be primarily prayer support, for others online, and for others face-to-face – but the wonderful good news about God's community is that *everyone* matters, everyone has a role, everyone gets to play.

When Jesus calls his first disciples as recorded in our first reading in Mark, his call is a simple one – 'follow me'. Not just 'believe' (v15), but 'follow' (v17). It's active: it's a way of life, not a thought process. Jesus calls us to live with purpose, and to get involved.

Our second reading in Romans reminds us that **we all have gifts, and part of what it means to be faithful followers is simply to use them**. Some of the gifts Paul mentions are overtly 'spiritual', many are practical. The point is that you've got those gifts for a reason. What are yours? How could you offer them to God in this season of your life?

And I love the last part of this passage: could there be a better template for our exhausted world at present? Joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer, practising generosity and hospitality. Hope, patience, prayer, generosity. That's the recipe, isn't it? And the order is right, too: we need hope first; then the realistic perspective of patience (we've needed a lot of that). And then the two engines of our response: prayer and generosity.

So as I close, this is my call to action, to each one of you: what part is God calling you to play? And how can we as a church help you to do that?

We're starting with a big focus on creation over the next month or so – taking that love of nature and putting it into action. Watch this space for lots of exciting events across our team and reaching our community. But there are also lots of decisions we have to make over next few weeks about what we invest in, and how we sustain a faithful and fruitful ministry here – more than just 'doing stuff', but reflecting who we are, and what our vision is. We are followers with a calling to bless the world.

So here's the question for all of you to take away: what is Jesus calling each of you to?