

Isaiah 6:1-8, Luke 5:1-11

Call and Discipleship

“And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him.” Luke 5:11

Holy Fear is underrated. The laudable desire of the church to place love and grace at the forefront of Christian preaching has left us suspicious of those like the demons in the Letter of James whose faith causes them to tremble. But Holy Fear, properly understood, is nothing to be afraid of. It isn't the tense nervousness of a student before an exam, a candidate before an interview, nor is it the bodily panic of physical fear, fear of violence of fear for a loved one in danger. Holy fear is not, in these senses, fear at all: it is the acknowledgement – however it is made - that one is in the presence of God.

Isaiah and Simon Peter both know this holy fear: woe is me, for I am lost – for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts, shouts Isaiah as the vision in the temple begins to reveal its literally awful truth, the Lord himself is here. Go away from me, Lord, I am a sinner, shouts Simon Peter as he – with just the same awful realisation – comes to terms with the fact that the man who has come into his presence is the one who has

brought an abundance of fish where the water was empty, the one who has called forth life out of nothing whatsoever.

The call to discipleship is not an offer which is made for us to consider. In one of the classics of modern theology, Dietrich Bonhoeffer observes that the fishermen whom Jesus calls at the beginning of each gospel respond immediately and unequivocally to that call. They don't stand around and ask complex questions about Jesus' true identity, neither do they stop to consider what it is they are doing. They respond in faith and obedience, and they do so because acknowledging who Jesus is, recognising the person who is calling them, leaves them absolutely no choice. If we are umm-ing and ahh-ing about whether or not to follow Christ then we have clearly not acknowledged him as our Lord and God.

A disciple is one who learns, but that learning begins with the call to follow. The original title of Bonhoeffer's great work usually rendered in English as the Cost of Discipleship is in fact simply “Nachfolgen” – following. That remarkable book begins with Bonhoeffer's insistence that Christianity has forgotten to acknowledge that the grace of God is something costly. Cheap grace, he thinks, is what results from not taking seriously what is necessarily demanded by God's gift of salvation. If with the Reformers, we stress the absolute graciousness of God in justifying me, a sinner, we are in danger of creating for ourselves an

easy Christianity, whereby my life can be lived as I choose because of the safety net of salvation which my faith in Christ provides. Rather, Bonhoeffer suggests, we should think of grace as something costly, something which demands obedience, something which has very real and very practical consequences.

Contrary to some misreadings, Bonhoeffer does not regard grace as something for which one strives. It is costly because it entails striving, but one is only able to strive as a Christian because that grace comes first. More importantly, however, that grace is costly not first of all to me, but first of all to the God who chooses to enter into my world, to embrace all that my sin and weakness costs, and to bear that cost in suffering and death in order to overcome it.

The first disciples are called to act, to do something. In the case of the fishermen, they are called so that they themselves may call, may catch other fish in their miraculous net. Likewise, you and I are called to act, and we are called to do specific things, to act as Christians in the world and towards those around us, not to think thoughts of abstract virtue or to detach ourselves from that which we find uncongenial or worldly. Bonhoeffer, in fact, insists on what he calls the this-worldliness of Christianity. In a letter written in prison he tells his friend how previously he had thought that one could acquire faith by living a holy

or saintly life but that he had come to realise that such attempts take us apart from the world, and it is within the world that Christ's call is heard, by us as by those ordinary working fishermen. By this worldliness, Bonhoeffer says he means "living unreservedly in life's duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities. In so doing we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously not our own sufferings, but those of God in the world, watching with Christ in Gethsemane. That, I think, is faith."

The point, then, is not just that we are called to act, to do something real in the real world around us. The point is that we are called by Jesus Christ, by the God who identifies himself with that world, by the God who is not detached and remote, not to be reached by separation and transcendence, but who is always God for and with us, here and now, not in abstract but in the concrete realities of world life – the events, the relationships, the tasks, the failures, the efforts that characterise human life. A call to follow him, to be like him, must be a call to act in the world, in this life. For it is in this life that God comes to us in Christ, reveals himself to us as one among us, as he revealed himself to those peasant fisherman by that lakeside.

That fearful acknowledgement of who God is may fill us with temporary alarm, but it should equally alert us to the impossibility of refusing the

call of Christ. If this is the one who calls me, who am I to turn my back. If this one, above all, is the one who has taken upon him the cost of my own life, then the many things of which I might be afraid are dissolved into that compelling, that holy fear which drives me as I begin to act, to do real things for real people in a real world, to celebrate the grace of God which gives, demands and enables so much in the weak and nervous person I call myself, the person who was more afraid of being found out than of finding God himself. For Bonhoeffer, that grace meant many things, among them it meant the grace to recognise the anti-Christ when he saw it, to be imprisoned for his opposition to Naziism and eventually to be killed. He was hanged in prison on April 9 1945, less than a month before the end of the war, practically within the sound of the allied guns. Costly grace indeed.