

The Third Sunday after the Epiphany 2026, Year A

1 Cor 1.10-18, Matthew 4.12-23

Allegiance – it seems to be hardwired into us. The need to identify with this or that person or group probably emerges from our tribal origins. Our ancestors could never have survived on their own without shared practices of hunting and defence. We see in movies like the Hunger Games, or reality TV shows like the Traitors how our natural response to a situation of threat or competition is to make alliances rather than going it alone.

Allegiance is the instinctive response of humans to our need to be safe, but also to build and prosper. Allegiance speaks to our human ability to co-operate, to form teams, to solve problems and creatively draw on the gifts of the many to make new discoveries.

The trick is to know when our instinct for group allegiance is being mobilised to build up and nurture, versus when our sense of group identity is entrenching division, in/out thinking, and hostility.

As Christians, it's important to keep a close eye on whether the security we enjoy in belonging to the Church, and particularly our "brand" of Church, has become more important to us than our following of Jesus Christ.

Belonging to Christ's Body should free us to know God and to love and serve our neighbour in the ways modelled to us by Jesus in the Gospels. But to many people, belonging to their chosen part of the Church can become an end in itself, a marker of identity and a place to feel safe. And being human, this can quickly degenerate into factions and arguments as we police the boundaries of our group's beliefs and behaviours.

So for example, this group practices infant baptism, this group insists on adult immersion. This group uses icons in worship, this group thinks icons are idolatrous. This group believes that the Bible is the inerrant word of God, this group believes that the writings of Scripture are culturally bound and ought not to be taken literally. This group goes out on the streets to protest in the name of God against immigration and the rainbow community, while this group goes out on the street to protest lack of action on climate change, or a genocide half a world away.

Diversity of belief and practice are natural. We are all different and the ways we express faith and relate to God are also different. The Church can embrace that diversity and still be unified. But too often, when we find ourselves getting agitated and defensive about our differences, we betray the fact that we are more in love with our version of Christianity than we are with Jesus. We have become people defending our safety, our belonging to an in-group, rather than having our eyes fixed on Christ.

So we hear in our Epistle reading today St Paul appealing to the church in Corinth to stop identifying with their group, named for the person who catechised and baptised them (Apollos, Cephas, Paul), and to remember their primary allegiance, which is to Jesus Christ.

I was reading a comment thread recently where some Anglican folk were expressing their admiration and appreciation for their bishop. Which is fine – it's nice to feel like you can respect and trust the most visible sign of the Church where you serve. But as the thread went on, it became clear that some people's witness with non-Church folk has become a proclamation of how cool their bishop is. One woman wrote about how she "was telling the person in the hospital bed next to hers about 'insert bishop's name here,'" as a kind of evangelistic strategy.

I wonder, do we find it easier to talk about the lovely church we go to, or its music, or its politics, than to talk about Jesus Christ, and his renewing and healing work in our lives? Are we more attached to our Anglicanism than we are to Christ and our friendship with God through the Spirit?

Because the fruit of that orientation will inevitably be disputation and a stubborn resistance to change. That way lies the kind of church split that comes about because someone puts four candles on the altar rather than two, or dares to move the pews.

All those baptised into Christ are joined to Christ. But it is all too easy to take our eyes off that identity and instead revert to the safety of proclaiming the rightness of our faction.

And that's because following Jesus is challenging, unstable, risky and uncertain. There is no clear programme to follow, no firm rules, no manual of liturgical practice that is written into the Gospel text. We follow Jesus by following the Spirit's call in us, urging us to love. Sometimes following Christ takes us beyond traditional borders and allegiances, into territory and among people we've been taught to fear or hate. The Church's safety rests on the care and power of God in Christ to protect and heal us as we take up the cross, not on our instinctive desire to form human allegiances.

Which brings us to our Gospel reading for today, where Jesus deliberately withdraws from the place where he grew up and "makes his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali." Matthew directs our attention to a prophecy of Isaiah, promising that the light will dawn for the people dwelling in this dark place.

The territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, by the sea of Galilee, was historically the part of ancient Israel that had been occupied the longest by foreign powers – it was taken over by Assyria before the rest of Judea. So Jesus is moving to start his ministry in the place recalled as the most abandoned, the most oppressed in Israel's story. And, being on the coast among fishermen, he uses the metaphor of fishing to describe the kind of rescue mission that he's on.

If we see the water in this instance as oppression, alienation, occupation – something to be feared – then Jesus' invitation to Simon, Andrew, James and John is a call to free people from their desperation and despair. Jesus is not the first to use this image – Jeremiah talks of God sending fishermen to find and extract the exiles from their places of hiding and bring them home. (16.16)

Andrew McGowan says, "Jesus' first call is to these who will join him in proclaiming and living into the reign of God under occupation."

Jesus calls these first disciples to follow him, and to offer to others a way of life that is free and dignified. It is a way that has one allegiance – not to flag or country or prayer book or the doctrine of substitutionary atonement – but to this kingdom of Jesus where the lost are found and a table of blessing is laid for the oppressed in the sight of their enemies.

It can be difficult to find a plumb line to guide us in recognising an authentic expression of Christianity – what should the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church look like? How do we know when we're dealing with an expression of the true church, or a toxic, divisive counterfeit?

Today our Gospel gives us one reliable key: life in Jesus helps people to stand up and walk home when previously they had been on the ground with someone's foot on their neck. Wherever there is alienation from home, from the dignity of adequate food and shelter, where people are forced off their land or denied expression of their culture, wherever there is mental anguish and isolation instead of community and peace of heart – the Church is called to walk alongside that sea of trouble and proclaim and live the freedom of God's reign. Can we answer that call to follow?

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