

The Pulling Power of his Prestige
Epiphany Three, Year A
Matthew 4: 12-23
23 January 2011

Trying to account for the hysteria of female fans when the Beatles visited New Zealand one could argue that they were copying what they had seen film footage of fans doing in Britain and America. Or you could suggest that their music, which seems so tame now, was in a style and idiom that removed inhibitions and that encouraged ecstatic behaviour and communal frenzy.

But there was something else at work as well, as pointed out by their music producer, who noticed that in their interaction with others there was a definite trace of charisma about them. People felt better about themselves, and about life, simply by being in their presence. That was why they pressed forward to get close to them, or to touch them if that was possible.

In Pasolini's film, "The Gospel according to Matthew" Jesus strides on to the beach and gazing intently at the two pairs of brother's calls out their names, in Italian of course, "Simone," "Andréa," "Jacomó," "Johannes." What makes the scene come alive is the expression on their faces at the moment of call, the looks of thrilled recognition, awe, warmth, delight and joy. There is something in the way he carries himself, and requests their commitment that strikes a note of deep correspondence within them.

Is this then another charisma driven story, something that we can readily understand in our age of celebrity stardom in which special people command attention by sheer force of personality? Or is there an easy explanation – these were simply people he had grown up with, and who he had become friends with, and whose loyalty he had won over. So in that scenario this is simply the start signal on a plan of campaign that they had been discussing for quite some time?

In the Hebrew Scriptures the word *kabod* conveys the sense of weight and depth of personality, what we might call prestige. It is this personal prestige that gives Jesus his pulling power, and it is different to charisma. One New Testament commentator writes of Jesus' penetrating crowd piercing disciple-making gaze. In a crowd scene he looks intently at each of the individuals gathered there with a keen eye for those who have a hint of correspondence to his mission making agenda. If he catches their eye and draws them in a short conversation usually follows that sounds them out on the subject of the call of a lifetime. There is something in them, and there is something in him, that operates as a powerful undercurrent of communication and invitation that connects at a primal level. There is much more going on in these transactions than meets the eye.

We live in a time when life coaches and self help books are constantly telling us that we need personal goals, personal growth plans and a purpose driven life. What weariness of spirit these clichés induce in me, for these are distortions and very faint echoes of a much more wonderful truth about us in our essential nature. There is a momentum in the human creature that orientates us towards living in accordance with the will of God. We find our satisfaction and fulfilment in life when we are obedient to his life flourishing agendas. And there is a specific piece of Kingdom assisting work that we are asked to help make happen that is our particular piece of the action. That is what is meant by our God given vocation.

Which is why Simon Peter, Andrew and James and John were thrilled to be asked to join in Jesus' mission. Here was something that mattered more than being a fisherman. Finally the key to their lives had been unlocked, and they were off on the adventure of a lifetime that at the same time was what they had been born to do.

The recognition factor that this was so is sparked off by the prestige of Jesus. It draws them as an advance notification that there is more to him than just a plus personality. In fact there is a hiddenness to what Jesus is about and the way he is going to go about it that is just the opposite of a razzle-dazzle style of presentation. For where all this is heading to is the Cross, that occasion of submitting himself so completely to the will of the Father in poverty and lowliness that the very definition of Divine glory will be radically changed. For obvious reasons he is not to going to declare that up front right at the start. It will be discovered and declared along the way as they have been prepared and fortified to receive this startling and gruelling denouement to the story.

Various New Testament scholars have defined the gospels as four passion narratives, each with an extended introduction. Even in this time and story of beginnings this is where it is all heading. And yet even this destination point of right suffering that overcomes the pain and wrong of the world is somehow located in the form of personal presentation that Jesus brings in to this morning's scene on the beach. For what gives lustre to his personal attractiveness, what polishes his prestige, are the subtle signals that he gives off that he is about to head in to the eye of the storm, and to thereby reshape the expectations of human destiny.

Those who are ready to receive his call somehow intuitively pick up on this deep truth about the direction in which he is going and what he will get up to, even if they cant fully understand it or put it into words. In fact it is just as well that they cant for if they did they would run a mile. And yet the thrill of recognition, and the awe, and the emotional warmth of response, and the joy show that they have somehow

cottoned on to the end point of where his and their vocational journey is heading. At an affective, emotional, pre-rational level they have been gripped by an anticipation of that breakfast on the beach scene that will conclude John's gospel in an aura of Easter wonder.

Many of the fundamental decisions we make in life are arrived at without having all the facts in front of us, and without a long process of rational reflection. Of course information and deliberation are almost always helpful in getting to a wise choice. But intuition, anticipation and imagination have their place too in inspired courses of action. Often when God invites us in to new beginning in life, or of Christian witness and ministry, he can't give us the whole picture in one neat proposition because we are not in the right space, or are not yet possessed of enough Christian maturity, to take it all on board in a useful and positive way. But often the currents of feeling that go with our response to a call are an indication of where he will take us to in the end.

When Simon and Andrew and James and John responded so wholeheartedly on that fateful day on the beach, they had without knowing it gone looking for trouble. But the depth of that decision would be confirmed in all the paradoxes that would follow. George Herbert captures the rhythm of it when he writes:

Come my Way, my Truth, my Life:
Such a Way, as gives us breath:
Such a Truth, as ends all strife:
Such a Life, as killeth death.

Come, my Joy, my Love, my Heart:
Such a Joy, as none can move:
Such a Love, as none can part:
Such a Heart, as joys in love.