

January 22 2017 - Matthew 4:12-23, I Cor 1 10-18

God works through communities, holding us and growing us through our relationships with each other.

I remember the first conversation I had with Ewan. We were at a social event at the firm of solicitors where we worked. We were both cornered by one of the more senior partners who talked at length about the problems of roadworks and traffic cones in the centre of Bristol. It's not something that would have stuck in my mind under normal circumstances, but this is a conversation we have revisited over the intervening years. You see this seemingly insignificant conversation lead to friendship, to romance, to marriage and five children. Who would have thought it at the time!

I say I remember the conversation. I think it took place at lunchtime over coffee and sandwiches, but it could have been in the evening with wine and cheese. I think it was the first time we spoke, but Ewan was new to the firm and we may well have been introduced earlier in the week. If you speak to Ewan about it, his recollection could be very different.

This may help us understand why this account of the calling of the first disciples is different to the passage in John that we had last week. In John's gospel, John the Baptist was present when Jesus started his ministry, in Matthew's he has been arrested. In Matthew's, Peter is one of the first to be called, in John's he is slightly later. The essential thing is that Jesus is at the start of his public ministry and is gathering together a group of men, who came to be known as "The Twelve". These men will spend time living alongside Jesus and working with him. These men will become the founders of the Christian church.

Of course, Peter, Andrew James and John knew nothing of this when they accepted Jesus' call to "Follow me." I imagine they thought they were just going along for the afternoon to find out more about an intriguing man. They cannot have had the slightest idea about where this conversation would lead.

The four fishermen do follow and Jesus continues his ministry gathering along the way the men he wants beside him. As we read the different accounts in the gospels and in the Book of Acts, we learn more about these people.

- James and John, the brothers squabbling about their place in the pecking order.
- Matthew the tax collector, both disliked and distrusted by fellow Jews, but a friend to the Roman authorities.
- Simon the Zealot, a political activist, deeply against the Roman authorities.
- Thomas who needed to see proof of Jesus' resurrection with his own eyes.
- Peter, hot headed and impetuous.

Would you pick these people to join your team to change the world?

As we read on we see these people grow into the people God wants them to be. What is more, God uses their differences to grow others and to grow themselves. Through Matthew people can see Jesus model his acceptance of tax collectors and sinners. People identify with the characteristics of doubting Thomas or hot headed Peter as we do when we read the Gospels today. Peter mellows with experience and becomes the "Rock" that Jesus foresaw, when he gave him a new name.

Like the disciples we find that through interaction with others we can thrive, grow and flourish.

This is the "Blob Tree", a tool used by people working in human resources to explore our feelings and the way we interact with those around us. It can be a representation of any group of people in any place. It could be a school, a place of work, a church.....

In the Gospel story today, Peter and Andrew, James and John might see themselves at the bottom of the tree just starting their journey, or even not yet on the tree, but looking up in anticipation. Zebedee, who did not go with them could also be looking up, wishing them well on their journey. Or, he could be the grumpy one at the bottom, annoyed because he has been left with all the work to do.

As he lives and works with Jesus, Peter may feel he is further up the tree, as they ride into Jerusalem, he may feel right at the top, but then during the trial and crucifixion he could be the one hanging at the bottom, or even the one falling.

The thing I love about this picture, particularly if you look at it from a Christian point of view is that there is no "wrong" place to be. Even the people on the grass at the bottom are looking at the tree. Everyone is connected, everyone has a role to play and, because they are blobs, not people, even the one falling can pick himself up and start again in true Tom and Jerry style.

To me this is an illustration of a community which is honest in acknowledgment of its differences and weaknesses, where people can develop and grow.

There is lots to see in this picture and you may like to look at it again, perhaps to consider your own place within the church community or some other group. There are copies of the Blob Tree at the back of church to take away with you as well as a link on the website version of this sermon.

Another biblical community is Noah's Ark. The ark was a community of opposites. A community of creatures, large and small, aggressive and passive, carnivores and herbivores. It is a miracle they did not all chomp each other to bits. I have heard the Ark described as a community of opposites gathered together by God, locked in against the storms outside and held safe.

When I look at the Blob Tree I see a community held in God's love. A community of people, the same - but different, united - but not uniform. Loved and given the space to grow into the people God wants them to be.

Paul is appealing to the community in Corinth for unity in a similar way. Corinth was a cosmopolitan melting pot of people from many cultures. You might think that this is an ideal place for a new church to grow and thrive, but as the early church evolves, it's values are corrupted by influences from elsewhere. Many groups form each with its own take on the Christian message. Any discussion had become impossible through infighting and bickering.

Paul appeals to the Corinthians by reminding them of the Cross. He reminds them of the core truths of the Gospel message. Christ, the son of God lived amongst us and died so that all could come to know God and have eternal life.

Paul reminds the Corinthians and, though them us too, not to neglect this central message which binds together Christians from diverse worship traditions and cultures.

We live in a divided world today. We live in times of uncertainty. New world powers are emerging in China and South America. We have a new and controversial President in America who has stated his aim to "Put America First."

Negotiations over Brexit will be tough, there is much at stake and people have very deep held views. Conflicting interests and contrasting agendas mean that some people will get hurt. How can we manage this without becoming divided?

This week is the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. The dates are chosen as they fall between two feast days relating to St Peter and St Paul, reminding us, like our reading today, that there have been divisions in the church from the very beginning.

Debate and discussion are good things. It is through our differences that we grow, but we can only do so if we are held together in our communities, in God's love. With God's love, amazing things can be achieved. Without it we run the risk of division which can lead to hurt, hate and war.

The Church of England prays regularly for wisdom for **all** in authority, whether we agree with them or not. It's easy to go along with the ridicule and cynicism, but this is our world now, we all have a responsibility to make it work.

We must pray, but it is important that we do not then just sit back and watch whatever unfolds.

Richard Rohr is an American theologian who commented shortly before the Presidential inauguration. He said that, as the people of Christ,

we have a tremendous responsibility to work together to speak truth to power, to peacefully advocate for the rights of all beings and the earth.

Like Peter and Andrew on the shore of Lake Galilee, and like Ewan and I over coffee all that time ago, we do not know what lies before us. In 20 years' time, we may not remember the details of President Trump's inauguration speech.

In this week of Prayer for Christian Unity, I pray that, whatever happens, we will remain united in the love of God. United, but not uniform, held by God in a place where differences are celebrated and used for growth and held as the body of Christ with Christ central to everything that we say and do.

<https://www.coetail.com/technovice/files/2015/09/The-Blob-Tree.jpg>

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