

**“From the shoreline” a sermon based on Mark 1:14-20 preached on
24 January 2021 at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand by Kerry Enright**

The gospel of Mark chapter one, verse 15 - “Now is the time! Here comes God’s kingdom! Change your hearts and lives, and trust this good news!” A reflection in the first person ...

You may have noticed my hands. Wrinkly, brown, scratched, rough, They are certainly not smooth. They’ve spent a lot of time in the water and in the sun. I am a fisherman and I spend my time casting a net. Or cleaning fish or mending nets or repairing boats or just waiting for the weather. Have you tried pulling a wet, heavy, awkward net into a boat without falling out, keeping your balance? I know I smell ... the fishy juice seeps into my pores. No matter how hard I wash. There are people who avoid me – I notice that. It’s not easy work. But before I go too far, let me introduce myself. My name is Hezekiah and I am a fisherman.

I am speaking with you today, because years ago I saw Simon and Andrew leave their nets and follow the prophet. I had known them for a long time. We fished together. Our families were friends. It’s not a big town and we try to help each other. In some ways I was not surprised at them walking away. There has to be more than this. Day after day, working hard, earning little. We’re among the poorest in our land. The Romans make certain of that. They have claimed ownership of the lake, they tax us heavily, and they take a percentage of our earnings. Even when we work hard and catch many fish, we can end up making no money. No money means no food. But so far only the farmers have protested. They refused to harvest their crops because it was all going to the Romans, and eventually they marched on Jerusalem. So when the prophet came, and offered a different way, I was not surprised. I can see that for Simon and Andrew, now was the time. Enough was enough. It had gone on too long. It is time to live into something new.

But how do we bring change when the powers seem overwhelming, when Roman rule will last forever, where we are so insignificant, so puny? As I watched them leave, I wondered how the prophet would lead. He didn’t go to Rome as Moses went to Pharaoh demanding “let my people go!”. Rome and Caesar were irrelevant to the prophet. And although he was popular he didn’t seem interested in forming a political movement. He didn’t seize the moment,

and use people to promote himself although he had the opportunity. Nor, it seemed, was he that interested in organised religion. He didn't become a religious leader, a chief rabbi or a patriarch.

And he didn't follow the paths others took. We have prophets in our land, people who lead movements, but this prophet didn't seem to fit any of them. He was no freedom fighter, for example. In our history we have often fought back. Zealots have used guerrilla warfare to counter overwhelming power. People were ready to die for our country and its liberation. Yet none of the movements brought liberation, except for the Maccabees for four years. The prophet was more than a freedom fighter.

There are others who think the best response to occupation is religious as it is God's judgement because the people have forgotten God's law. The empire is nothing but heathenism and heathenism can be pushed back only if people live by the law of God, if they live morally upright lives. Only such faith will overthrow the Roman heathens. But the prophet is not a Pharisee. Nor is he a Sadducee, people who think the best way is to accommodate to oppressive power. Sadducees have a religious function, a group that is small but influential, well connected and aristocratic. They understand the dynamics both of the street and those in power. Their slogan is "We don't like the empire, but as long as it is here, we have to deal with it." They walk the tightrope involved in the question – Is this God's or is this the emperor's? They had to please the people and those in power, standing in the middle, mediating, negotiating, seeking accommodation. The prophet was more than a Sadducee.

Others more actively collaborated. If you cannot beat them, join them. Opportunists, who seek to benefit from the empire by doing business with it. Tax collectors who collected from the people and kept some for themselves. No empire lasts without such collaborators. The prophet was no collaborator. Others did the opposite of collaborate – they withdrew. They were disillusioned and disappointed with their religious leadership who compromised too much with the empire. They were frightened of the invading culture of the empire that was changing the behaviour of the people. To them the world was lost, corrupt and evil. The only possible response was to retreat from the world into the desert, into small communities to create an alternative

social structure. This structure would enable people to uphold the old rules and the pure teachings of the law in anticipation of the final battle against the evil empire. But the prophet did not belong to the community of Qumran.

So Andrew and Simon set out on a journey unlike any other. Not fighting back, not observing the law, not accommodating, not collaborating, not retreating, not focusing on Rome, not forming a political movement, not being religious leaders. I saw in them a different way. A way I saw in how they travelled and in the company they kept. They went from one town to another, from village to village, especially to the remote villages whose names were barely known. They went to people who weren't religious leaders or politicians, who weren't intellectuals or part of the elite. They went to people who were on the margins, people like Andrew and Simon, people like me. People possessed by demons. People not in control of their lives. People who feared for life. People who could not stand upright. People who were cast out. People who had almost no education, who had not received any attention, who had few if any opportunities.

So Andrew and Simon remained Andrew and Simon, rough hands, rough words, rough behaving, but inspired, caught up. But I saw them caught up in a way that reached out to others just like us. It became their driving ambition. Their vision was much more than Rome, more than Caesar, more than the empire, more than the Temple, more than the restoring of Israel. They held to a God with a grand vision, a future on a vast scale, more than we had imagined. To a world that ceased to be hostile for anyone, a world that would be a home for all. The reign of God on earth. I saw in Andrew and Simon that it was whole of life, not a bit of religion and a bit of politics and a bit of spirituality – more than any of that, whole of life. They imagined a different world, so different it blew my mind. And when I met them, it was as if they had a new heart, a new mind, a new spirit. As if God was near, a presence, a power close at hand. They began to live as if the new world was just around the corner, very close. And not just them. They were part of a group of people wrapping their minds around this new way of being. Growing together, learning together, encouraging together, journeying together, following together.

So what of me? I see in Simon and Andrew a hope, a spirit that is tugging at me. I don't understand it much. I am afraid of what it might mean for my relationships and my work and my way of life. Can I risk these? But then enough is enough, and if not now, when? I look beyond the shoreline to the sea so familiar to me. As a fisherman, despite the risks, nearly every day I trust myself to that watery realm. I wonder if I can trust myself to the prophet's way, to be with him, and all the others with hands as rough as mine.

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Knox Church

449 George Street

Dunedin

New Zealand

Ph. (03) 477 0229

www.knoxchurch.net

Kerry Enright: 027 467 5542, minister@knoxchurch.net