

# ‘FOLLOW ME’ SERMON

*University church of St Mary the Virgin, Oxford*

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May I speak in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Well, what a few days it has been. We’ve had a political inauguration; we’ve had global marches. We’ve had millions of women and some men (but mainly women) coming out to shine a light on what they believe to be a dark place. It has been quite a moment in 2017 for the world. But just before we get too depressed about America and Trump’s ‘America First’ and introspection of his country, I want to share something with you that I read this morning in *The Times*. It can be tempered slightly by the fact that Melania’s inaugural ball dress was in fact designed by a Frenchman who had also dressed Hilary Clinton and Michelle Obama. So there is at least some European influence coming in there.

But more seriously, today’s gospel is about another kind of inauguration; and it’s the inauguration of our Saviour, Jesus Christ. On the third Sunday of Epiphany, Matthew records the inauguration and he clearly sets out three things in our Gospel: the mission of Jesus, asking us to repent for the Kingdom of Heaven, has come near; the forming of his cabinet, as you might say, his colleagues, his inner circle, his team, by asking the fishermen to be his disciples and follow him; and finally we hear the action that his new time in office is going to be recognised by, which is the proclaiming of the good news of the Kingdom, and the curing of every disease and every sickness among the people.

I think one of the things that struck me when I came to this passage is what seems to be the very quickness – the immediacy – with which the fishermen look in the eyes of Jesus and drop everything and follow him. There is a tiny bit in John which says that they were already known to Jesus, but in a sense that’s not the point of this passage. These fishermen, I believe, had in a sense their own personal epiphany. If you think ‘epiphany’ is the word that means a sudden gift of vision, a sudden new way of seeing, a feeling of awareness, an aliveness, an intensity where your senses might quicken, on those shores of Galilee, meeting their Saviour, something quite extraordinary happened – and quite quickly. Now we will never know what Jesus looked like; we’ll never know what it felt to look into his eyes; but there must have been something in his leadership, skills and ability – some powerful, majestic, charismatic essence of a real power drawing those fishermen to his side; leaving their family, their livelihood, their known social structures; putting the nets down and going on to be beside him, into the unknown.

Now, there’s a portrait painted by Rembrandt, a Dutch painter from the 17<sup>th</sup> C, and it’s called *The Head of Christ*; and there are quite a number of versions of it. I am bringing this up because in my recent ‘E-pistle’ I mention icons where you see Christ’s face usually very starkly, his eyes looking out, a halo around him, very formal – even though, as we know, ikons are that window into heaven. However,



Rembrandt's portrait painted in about 1648 represented a huge shift in painting Christ, not as a divine person, faraway, with a light that is holy, but as a man, as a man walking beside us, as a man that we know can share our worries and our humanity. It's a face lit up by oil, and it's believed he chose a Jew as his model for it. And so in a sense I think of *that* face coming to the edge of the Sea of Galilee – with light in it, but an accessibility, a humanity, and an understanding that enabled those fishermen to trust in Jesus and to go with him.

Now, of course, this is where Isaiah helps, and this is where we have Matthew referring back to the Old Testament. The darkness that's referred to in Isaiah is the darkness that was caused by the threat of the Assyrians; but the darkness in Matthew that is recorded is the darkness – the spiritual darkness – of the time. And Matthew shows that the coming of Jesus to Galilee is the coming of a light, a hope and a gladness. The image of light is therefore central, not just to epiphany, but also to Christianity. In John's gospel Jesus says,

*"I am the light of the world. He who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life. For the people who have walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who have lived in the dark land are now experiencing the shining of the Light of Life"* (John 8:12).

And that's why the Rembrandt painting is so important; though it is a very natural representation of Christ there is a divine light that shines through.

Now inauguration has another side to it, which is leadership. What qualities of leadership came through in Jesus' early ministry? What model of leadership in 2017 should we be looking for in those who have been put into positions of power and authority? Now, our great new leader of the diocese is, as you know, the new Bishop Stephen Croft and he, quite conveniently for this sermon, has just written a book called *The Gift of Leadership*. I'm not his agent but I'm happy to plug it because I've enjoyed reading it and I've enjoyed looking for a few little things I want to share with you this morning. One of the words that he brings out about leadership is the need for *tenderness*. That's not something we would normally associate with bombastic and egocentric statements that have come from some leaders. In Paul's letter to the Philippians we have *"Let your gentleness be known to everyone"* (4:5), and in Proverbs XV, *'A gentle tongue is a tree of life, but perverseness in it breaks the spirit.'* So one of the things that Bishop Stephen thinks is important is a tenderness and a gentleness when you become a leader.

Another thing he talks about is the importance of the concept of the servant-leader; the Good Shepherd.

*"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives his life for the sheep"* (John 10:11-18)

*"Rejoice with me for I have found my sheep that was lost"* (Luke 15:4-6)

The sense in which Jesus could look into somebody's eye and in a single moment make them feel that he was the whole world to him is reflected in the Parable of the Lost Sheep because every single one of us matters to God. It doesn't matter if you've got 99 people in this congregation; if one isn't here that Jesus wants to be here, we should go out and find that person.

Now, there's another great Dutch theologian called Henry Nouwen, who's a Catholic; and he's written a book - which I have also read and love deeply, and knew before Stephen's - called *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership*. And he brings out two further points about being a true leader. One, you need to show your vulnerability; and two, as Judith said last week, you have to make yourself effectively redundant or go down the world's ladder of success. So what we in the world see as a ladder going up - we need to walk *down* those rungs.

So let me just talk a little about vulnerability. About three Sundays ago, as you know, I took over as Acting-Priest-in-Charge of St Mary's, the University Church. It's quite a job, I have to say. And I was at the table about to celebrate the Eucharist, and I looked around and thought: this is teamwork. This is really every single person here coming together to make this service work. And I went through the list of things that had to happen before we got to that moment of the Eucharistic Prayer. You know it, but if you list it, it's very long. You open the church, you put on the lights, you have the vestry open, you have the candles lit, you have the service sheet got, you have the choir practising, you have the Welcomers, and so on and so on... And in this time of Interregnum, in a time when we're waiting for our new leader to come - the Revd Dr Will Lamb, who I know will be wonderful - we have to share in our vulnerability as being able to lead, to share in the things we need. I call for help to Claire regularly, and she helps me; I share in my need to have the 'E-pistle' looked at because I'm dyslexic and I want to make sure that I'm not sending out to you apostrophes and spellings that won't go down (especially in an Oxford University context). We have to pull together as a team and actually it means that as a whole we are better than as a one; that a leader's vulnerability and honesty really matter in moving things forward.

*"Where two or three have met together in my name, I am there among them."* (Matthew 18:19-20)

And finally, I want to share with you that when we come to the Eucharistic Prayer there is one thing we ask. We ask to be formed in the likeness of Christ. We are able to do this by sharing together as a team in one bread and one cup, and we do it to honour the Lord. And I think the collectiveness of our worship is in fact a collective form of leadership, which is important. So we don't go *up* the ladder; we don't try to make ourselves individually more important than the other. When we come to the table we are as one. And that is the essence of what Henry Nouwen wanted to share with us as well.

So like the first followers of Jesus, today, in this church, *we* can experience Jesus. We might not see him face-to-face - we might not be able to look into his eyes - but what we practise together is an essence of that. Our eyes are no longer in the dark. We can see an inner light that God has put in each and every one of us. The dark horizon becomes bright; through his words Jesus brings light into the darkness of our thoughts and our feelings. All at once everything becomes clear to us, like the light that shone that day on the shores of Galilee, when the fishermen gathered their nets, put them down, responded to their call, their vocation, and their ministry.

In the name of Christ, Amen.