

Lately I've been wondering if I'm in danger of living a boring life. Certainly, a boring life isn't something I aspired towards or set out to do; when I was a teenager I did a variety of things specifically to avoid living a boring life, some of which were probably wiser than others. But either approaching, or being well ensconced into middle age, I'm wondering if it is creeping up. These thoughts came about after a Saturday night sat with Eleanor on the sofa, the two of us working together to fill in a tax return. I should say very much that this wasn't coming out of any sense of dissatisfaction. Paying tax in a way comes with a sense of gratitude; it's a sign that God has provided us with resources out of which we can share. Furthermore, it's a reminder that we live in a stable society with things like schools and hospitals that support us and to which we can contribute. Yet without any bad feeling, it did have us asking, are we living a boring life?

Let me tell you about someone who very much isn't living a boring life. According to the his website Pastor Robby Dawkins of Southlake Texas used to get stuck at asking the question of "What would Jesus do?",

without ever being equipped to do it. However, and I quote, when he started living the way Jesus did, he started living life, as he says, straight out of a superhero movie. And what's more, so can you, with the help of his book, "Do What Jesus Did", available now for just \$15. In this dangerous book (adjective his) you can find out how to use your God-given "power tools", to drive out demons, heal the sick, and make a dynamic impact for the Kingdom of God. Pastor Bill Johnson writes in the foreword, "My heart burns with passion, hope, and the wonder of what could become of my life with this book in my hand." Available now for just \$15.

Now just to be clear, I have nothing against Pastor Robby Dawkins. And my hope and prayer for him is that God uses his life and ministry to bless all kinds of people. Yet in my heart of hearts I have some doubts that, even if I were to read his book, my life would look substantially like the way he describes his own. In my more boring Christian life, when it comes to having a dynamic impact for the kingdom, I feel like I'm less about healing serious illnesses and driving out demons than I am trying to be vaguely kind to people,

trying to do the right thing by my employer by being vaguely competent at work. Trying to do the right thing by the government by not evading tax. Without depreciating Robby I need some aspirations for Christian living that scale down to my potentially boring and middle aged existence.

Which is why I find the verses around our reading from Luke's gospel an encouragement. Let's start with a verse just before our reading, in Luke 4, verse 42. If you've got a Bible open in front of you, you can follow along. In chapter 4 of Luke Jesus has been healing people and driving out demons, and people are amazed, with crowds coming to him to be made well. But Jesus says this, "I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because this is why I was sent". So the next two chapters, which include our reading, are about Jesus teaching, and proclaiming the good news.

Secondly, there's a shift which starts in our passage. Chapter 4 is all about Jesus doing amazing things.

But at the start of chapter 5 Jesus begins calling others to come and follow him. It's a shift, from Jesus doing things himself towards Jesus building a community.

And there is where I find some encouragement. Because if you are a Christian and want to do what Jesus did, then short of signing up to be on the miracles rota there are at least two things you can do. Firstly, you can share the good news with others. If you have this book in your hand, the Bible, and you read it, you can talk to other people about what you have read. You don't have to preach. You can sign up for children's work and share what you know with the Explorers group. You can talk to your family, or to a friend in the church café. By reading the Bible and telling someone else you can do what Jesus did.

Secondly, you can do what Jesus did by building and being part of the church community. You can come along to church on a Sunday morning. You can invite someone around for dinner, or visit them when they are in hospital, or pray for them during hard times. By building and being part of a Christian community you can do what

Jesus did. Which for someone like me is good news; you don't have to live in a superhero movie to have a Marvellous life with Jesus. Jesus gives hope to slightly boring people.

But I'm perhaps getting ahead of myself; let's get into the passage. I'd like to share three observations about Jesus and Christian community.

Firstly, Jesus builds a community out of people who hear the word of God. We get this in Luke 5 verse 1. "One day as Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret, the people were crowding around him and listening to the word of God." Jesus isn't just speaking any old words, he is sharing the word of God.

Which got me thinking; I would hope that most Christians would agree that Jesus' teaching contains some good ideas. But according to the passage they are more than that; it is the word of God; what God has made known about himself. To borrow a phrase, God is there, and he is not silent. In Jesus we see God made known: the Word, spoken into the world. In a

world full of ideas, we have, in Jesus, the truth of God.

Which for one make Jesus's message good news. Where in society people are looking for truth, Jesus speaks to them the truth of God. To take one example, there is a lot of concern in our society about equality, whether that be racial equality, or gender equality, or another form of equality. Yet in these discussions there's an underlying question; why should equality be the aim, when people are different? Thomas Jefferson famously wrote in the US constitution that it is self-evident that all men are created equal, but while we might agree with the idea, just saying that it is self-evident doesn't mean that it's actually true. And indeed it's easy to put across a counterargument. Someone might say that there's really no basis for equality at all. In the words of one Christian writer:

Some of us are big and tall,
Some of us are very small,
Some of us like pink and some like blue.
Some of us like reading books,
some of us like feeding ducks,
That's because we're different, me and you.

So then, we have a counter-argument. If we are self-evidently so different from each another, why should we aim to treat everyone equally? When tall people are different from small people and so forth? I think the best answer we have to that is found in the Bible. God loves everyone he's made. Whatever people's external characteristics, they have an intrinsic value and an intrinsic worth; an identity going deeper than what they enjoy or own or look like. So then where our culture has some kind of sense that people should be, deep down, of equal intrinsic value, the Bible gives us at the least a consistent basis for believing that that is the case.

Which I say not so much to talk about equality but to make the point that where the God who made the world speaks into the world, we would expect that to make sense of life. We would expect that word to be good. It's an issue that's made complicated by the fact that Christians have so often not behaved according to God's work, But as the psalmist writes, the word of God is good; a light to our feet and a guide to our path. So when as Christians we engage with our culture, we have a starting point for that engagement in the Bible.

Thinking about international politics, we have a starting point; God grants power to empires and kingdoms yet these kingdoms come and go. Thinking about marriage we have a starting point, in the relationship between Christ and the church. Thinking about society and how we treat one another, we have a starting point in God's love for everyone and the command to love our neighbour. God's word is good, and Jesus builds a community around it.

So then there is a question of whether or not we are hearing God's word.

There was an experiment reported in the Wall Street Journal whereby researchers programmed a number of computer to go on social media. Directed at the TikTok site, each computer was directed to watch videos that matched certain categories and interests, and to skip past the others. As they did so TikTok would adapt, feeding the computers more and more videos of the topic that the computers were programmed to look for. Sometimes within 40 minutes TikTok would be in a state where 90% of the videos being fed to the computer were on that specific topic.

Depending on what it looked at a computer might end up being fed an endless stream of videos of people using power washers to clean their driveway or patio. Or a stream of videos on right-wing extremism and conspiracy theories. Or in one case a stream whereby 90% of the videos suggested were related to depression and suicide. Whatever made the computers most likely to click the link, they were given. Which asks some questions. What is it that we are being fed? Which voices are we listening to? Among everything, do we hear the word of God?

Or indeed, we might ask, are we listening to anything at all? Thirty years ago if someone spent their life at home on the sofa, sitting and shouting at the TV, probably we would have called it madness. Now we call it the comments section. If Jesus builds a community of people who hear the word of God we might ask, are we a people who are listening?

Secondly, Jesus builds a community out of sinners, not superheroes. As the crowds are pushing around Jesus,

Jesus gets into Simon Peter's boat and pushes out a little into the lake so that everyone can hear. It's been a long night of fishing, and Simon hasn't caught anything, but after the teaching has finished, Jesus tells Simon to push the boat out further into deeper water and let down his nets one more time. Which in some ways is a ridiculous request; fish in the Sea of Galilee come out at night. But nevertheless Simon obeys. The men let down their nets, and they make a huge catch, threatening to swamp the boat and the one that comes to help them. It's only with a coordinated effort that they make it back to shore. And Simon falls at Jesus's knees and says, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!".

Perhaps you noticed the parallel with the passage from Isaiah. It's not that passages about the love of God are wrong, but on coming face to face with the real God, people have a sense of terror. God is somewhat dangerous. After all, if God does not tolerate evil, what of us who have not done good?

Most people I think would admit that from time to time they get things wrong.

Sometimes we don't keep track of time; we forget an important event. We try to say something that comes out all wrong. We can likely empathise with Peter having a bad and unproductive day at work. Yet these admitted failures aren't really much more than occasional incompetence. Sin goes much deeper than that. Sin is not just that the world around us is broken, but that we are the cause. I found a quote from Gus Spieth, an environmental lawyer, speaking on climate change, "I used to think", he says, "that the top global environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse, and climate change. But I was wrong."

The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed, and apathy, and to deal with these we need a spiritual and cultural transformation." To take that as an example, climate change isn't really a technological problem; we have the technology we need and the money to put it into practice. Rather, the problem is us. We are where we are because collectively we have chosen not to be somewhere better.

Yet Jesus builds a community out of sinners. He calls Simon to follow him. And if you read on through chapter 5 Jesus calls all kinds of others out of brokenness and sin. Jesus calls the leper, out of illness and social exclusion. He calls the paralysed man out of poverty and infirmity. He calls Levi the tax collector, who betrayed his own people for financial reward. Jesus calls the broken. And if I can use old language in an inclusive way, Jesus calls us to be man, not Superman. It's sinners, not superheroes. From brokenness to a new way of being humanity. It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. So Jesus calls sinners to repentance and a new way of life.

Finally, Jesus builds community by speaking community into being. I've talked a bit about the Bible, and Jesus' words, being the word of God. Yet the word of God is more than just the Bible.

I heard a talk on this passage by a Vicar who was very keen on fishing. And he said that sometimes, when he was out on the river bank, he would say a prayer before casting off, that that particular fly would catch something big.

Now, knowing this particular vicar, I am sure that the prayer he prayed would have been a very sound and Biblically based one, rooted in an understanding of God and of the Scriptures. Yet when he prayed that way, it wouldn't necessarily work. Not all the fish would suddenly jump out of the river and into his net. With Jesus, in this passage, it's different. Jesus says to Simon to put out into the lake, and Simon does it, in one translation, at the word of Jesus. And Simon takes in this huge catch. The word of Jesus is effective.

If you know the story of the Bible, in the beginning, God speaks the world into being. God says, 'Let there be light', and there was light. God says, 'Let there be plants and trees on the earth', and it was so. So in Luke 5, Jesus is the one who speaks, and it was so. Jesus speaks, and the fish fill the net. And so on in this chapter, Jesus says to the leper, "Be clean", and he is. He says to the paralysed man, "Get up, take your mat, and walk", and he does. Jesus says to the tax collector, "Follow me", and he does; Levi gets up, leaves everything, and follows Jesus. Jesus is the one who speaks, and it was so.

So we can rightly contrast Simon and Jesus. Simon's not catching fish stands against the shoal of fish caught at the words of Jesus. So when Jesus says to Simon, 'come and be fishers of men', we might expect a parallel. After the first fishing trip, with literal fish, we don't expect the second one to be driven by Simon. Rather, the church is built at the word of Jesus. Jesus builds community by speaking it into being.

I wonder if that gives a helpful perspective on our own situation, in interregnum, waiting for a new vicar. Certainly I've been very much looking forward to someone being appointed. And the good news has been that in response to our advert we had 14 people apply. A lot of people who are gifted in ministry and with experience of growing churches want to come here and lead and serve St Philip's Church. Which is exciting. Yet if I've got this passage right, that shouldn't be our key hope.

Simon of this passage becomes Simon Peter, named after the Greek word petros, the rock. Simon Peter's faith became the rock on which the early church was built.

Simon is then perhaps the one best example of Christian leadership in church history. Yet if the contrast between Simon's efforts and those of Jesus in catching fish are our model, the growth of Christian community is really not so much about Peter and very much about Jesus. I've got lots of hopes for the new vicar. I'm hoping that they might provide encouragement and leadership and support and organisation, that they might come along and preach better sermons than this one, but ultimately it's all about Jesus.

So then, at the moment while we in something of a difficult and in-between time, our hope shouldn't ultimately be that the new vicar will come in and fix it, so much as it is in Jesus, and in the community that Jesus brings about and has already brought about at St Philip's. Because community is the heart of Jesus' call. For most people it's not a call to leave your job or your school, or to leave your retirement plans completely behind, but it is a call to hear God's word and be part of the church community.

And indeed to include other people within that community. With Zoe moving on recently, where we have children and young people coming along to church or church groups, we might have a call in particular to include them within our community. We could eventually get a new youth worker. But we can't delegate the call of Jesus; we can't just outsource it to someone else; for children and young people we need to be a community now with them and for them as we are.

Let me sum up. In this passage we see Jesus speak the word of God. As he speaks, Jesus speaks community into being, bringing together sinners to become the community of the church. And as Jesus speaks, he calls us to follow. If miracles are your thing, we have spaces on the rota; please do get in touch. But primarily here we have a call to hear the word of God, to share that word, and to live as a community around the words of Jesus. And if we do that, perhaps life won't be so boring after all.