

Epiphany 2 18 January 2026

A Reflection by Rev Wayne Toleafoa

CALLED AND SENT

Isaiah 49: 1-7; I Corinthians 1: 10-18; Matthew 4: 12-23

In the Season of Epiphany, we celebrate the ever-brightening Light that Christ brought into the world. From the dark night in the Bethlehem stable, to the hiding time in Egypt – to the obscurity of life in small town Nazareth – to his baptism at the River Jordan and the beginning of his public ministry. We see the Light of the world slowly emerging, like the sunrise of a new day.

Our first reading from Isaiah reminds us that God's people are blessed - so that we may be a blessing or a 'light' to the nations (Isaiah 49:6). They are not blessed so that they can be self-indulgent and bask in the blessing. They are blessed so that they can be a blessing – or light, to the world. Isaiah also adds a cosmic dimension to the prophecy where he declares that we are known to God 'even before we are born' (Is 49: 1). The God we worship is the pre-existent 'forever God' who defies time and space.

Our second reading from 1 Corinthians is a more down-to-earth call to Christian unity – in the Corinthian church where pride had generated disunity. 'I belong to Paul' or 'I belong to Apollos' or 'I belong to Cephas' became badges of seniority and pride. Today that pride easily translates into, 'I belong to the Roman Catholic Church, or the Anglican Church' or 'I belong to the Presbyterian Church' or 'I belong to the Peak Vision Church'. **Christ is bigger than all our churches. Christ was and is a unifier, bringing Christians together.**

In our gospel reading today, we continue to follow the chronological journey of Jesus towards the cross.

Last week, we read about Jesus' baptism and the Holy Spirit conferring on Jesus his identity as, 'The Beloved Son of God'.

This week we reflect on the call of Jesus' first disciples.

In the story of his birth and his baptism, we see the human and the divine combined in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. He is Emmanuel - God's presence with us.

Jesus is still God's presence with us today as we pray to Jesus, and as we develop our relationship with Jesus through our worship, our thoughts and actions. As we take up our cross daily and follow Him.

‘Taking up your cross’ and following Jesus means different things for different people. While our lives share some basic common features - there are also nuances that make our lives unique. The sets of issues we face each day may be unique to you, or me. Our ‘ultimate concerns’ may be different. For instance, I pray each day for my children, that they will have a secure and happy future. I also pray for my siblings and their offspring. I pray for particular people I know, who are facing life and death situations, including people in this congregation.

These are among my ‘ultimate concerns’, which I share with Jesus in my prayers and in my thoughts.

The ultimate concerns for Christians living in places hostile to Christianity will be entirely different from our concerns.

If I was a homeless person without a job, my ultimate concerns would be entirely different from my present concerns.

We develop our relationship with God in a particular context and through daily interaction with God and others. A kind of triad – God, you and your neighbour. God, you and the world.

Our relationship with God/Jesus began ‘somewhere’ and that is what we can reflect on today, as we reflect on the story of Jesus calling his first disciples.

Where did your relationship with Jesus begin?

In today’s gospel reading, Matthew tells us that Jesus called Andrew and Peter and then called James and John when they were mending their fishing nets. They left their nets and followed him.

It’s very likely that all four of the first disciples knew Jesus before he called them. They had heard Jesus preach, watched Jesus do his healing miracles and observed the kind of person that Jesus was, long before he called them.

Andrew, James and John may even have been present at Jesus’ Baptism, and heard John the Baptist call Jesus, ‘The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world’ (Jn 1: 29). Jesus was no stranger to the first disciples. But until he called them, they were just observers of Jesus - not followers.

Lots of people today have heard about Jesus – but hearing a ‘call’ from Jesus - is next level up.

I wish we had time today to go around the church, and each of us say what moved us to want to follow Jesus? Each of us has an autobiographical story of our journey with Jesus.

If you would like to give a short testimony in this church, let me know, and we'll reinstate our Mission Moments, where people can share what was that moved them to follow Jesus.

All the first disciples had heard of Jesus and met Jesus before they were called to follow him.

Many of us were brought up in a church – but didn't become believers until we were teenagers or adults. Many people we grew up with, left the church altogether.

When I think of the word 'Call", my mind goes back many years to the Ministry Selection Boards for Knox Theological Hall. At one of those assessment weekends in Dunedin, several of us ministry candidates were asked why we wanted to be in ministry?

The replies were very different for each candidate.

One candidate said he felt a warm burning sensation in his heart as he thought of serving in ministry and he took this as his 'call' to ministry.

Another spoke of a dramatic conversion experience which left him feeling 'called' to ministry.

Another, and I hope he was kidding, said he'd heard the Moderator of the General Assembly preach at his parish one Sunday and he said to himself: "I'm sure I can do better than that! "So, he applied for ministry.

My answer was more mundane. I admired the work of the ministers I knew, growing up, and couldn't think of a better way to spend my life. They were such fine men and did such great practical work among the early Pacific Island migrant communities. My parents' generation.

One of them was a former English missionary, who took the trouble to learn Samoan and Cook Island Maori. I knew him all my life. In fact, he baptized me and my siblings when we were infants. Officiated at our confirmations and at the wedding of one of my older sisters.

After the Ministry Assessment weekend, some of us were immediately accepted for ministry training. Others were told they were not suitable, and others told to go back and do more study, and others told to do more reflection about whether ministry was really for them.

At the end of our long training, up to 7 years (3 for your first degree and 3 or 4 for your Theology degree), we were finally released upon the vacant, unsuspecting congregations of the Presbyterian Church.

You may be surprised to hear that the critic of the Moderator's preaching, was accepted for training and served in NZ and Australia until his recent retirement. He did have a good sense of humour.

I took some time out of my theological training and served as a teacher in a church school and as a Policeman in NZ before my ordination.

I have just completed 40 years in ministry (I was going to say 40 years in the wilderness) and have enjoyed every year of it. I've never looked for another job.

Every Christian has received a 'calling' from Christ, even if it isn't into the Ministry of Word and Sacraments.

We are each called into a lifelong relationship with Christ. A relationship that needs to be nurtured every day. And we are sent out to share that relationship with others.

It's very easy to nurture that relationship with Christ in a country like Aotearoa NZ.

We are surrounded by the natural beauty of the land, the bush and the sea. God's presence is in the beautiful creation around us.

We are blessed to be living in a country where there is religious freedom. You and I can worship how and when we wish - without fear of persecution.

Although we are living in a secular country it is a country that is 'culturally Christian'. A society influenced by the Christian values of justice and love. Imagine society without those two values. Christian values, not secular values.

We also live in a peaceful country where the only problems we have, are ones created by ourselves. How we get on with our neighbours; race relations in our country; our care of the less-fortunate - all depends on us.

Sharing our faith is a relational activity – few of us are evangelists. Few of us are convinced that membership drives, or more church programmes are the best way to grow the kingdom of God.

The kingdom is grown 'relationally' – even when we don't think our witness is being effective. Our families and friends see us with all our strengths and with all our flaws – we don't have to pretend to be happier than we are. We don't have to pretend to be more perfect than we are – all we need to do is be faithful to our 'calling' – we just don't know what impact our lives will have on others in the long run.

I have been genuinely surprised and humbled when people who were once in my youth group, or in a former parish, have, years later, thanked me for helping nurture their faith. When I was their minister, I had no idea that my ministry would have that kind of lasting impact.

I know that they felt the call of Christ on their lives and that they have nurtured that relationship right up to the present day.

That is how the Holy Spirit works and how Jesus continues to refresh our relationship with him.

PRAYER

God of calling and compassion,
you draw us, as you did to your first disciples ,
from the far edges of our lives into your light.
You place a new song in our mouths
and steady our feet on the rock of your faithfulness.
As your servant John pointed to the Lamb of God,
turn our eyes again to Jesus—
the One who knows us, names us,
calls us and sends us out into the world
to share his marvellous light .
Strengthen us to do your will with joy.
Make us signs of your steadfast love
in the places you send us this week
So guide our days in your peace,
that Christ may be revealed through us,
to the glory of your holy name.

Amen.