

CELEBRATING ST ANDREW'S DAY – REV'D CHRISTINE BARREN - 16 NOVEMBER 2008

Readings: Deut. 30: 11-14, Rom. 10:8–18, Matt: 4: 18–22

I wonder what Andrew thought he was doing when he left his nets on the edge of the lake and responded to Jesus' call? Perhaps he was just following along with his older brother.

Some believe he was originally a follower of John the Baptist. If that was true, his response was probably more comprehensible. He was already searching for the messiah – perhaps simply to free his country from the yoke of Roman occupation, or perhaps to reveal a land of peace and justice flowing with milk and honey to be forever theirs – as God had promised in the scriptures.

We really know very little of Andrew. It is believed that after Jesus' death and resurrection Andrew took the message of the gospel through Asia Minor and Greece. It was here that he was crucified by the Romans. Like his brother Peter, he refused to be crucified as Jesus had been – instead he died on a cross shaped like the cross we now call the Cross of St Andrew, the flag of Scotland and so part of the Union Jack.

Legend has it that over three hundred years later some of his bones were taken to the farthest point of the earth. The boat carrying them was wrecked off the coast of Scotland. A monk carried them ashore setting up a new community – possibly at St Andrew's - now probably most famous for its golf course.

The Reformation in Scotland with its very particular type of Calvinism saw a definite break from the Catholicism associated with Rome. With that break, the veneration of saints had no part in worship and yet St Andrew lived on in name and symbol.

I found myself exploring what a patron saint might have meant to those early Protestants who discarded so much of the tradition of the church under the leadership of John Knox. Indeed what might a patron saint means to me today. After all one of my forebears, Bishop John Hooper, was burned at the stake by Mary. I come from good Protestant stock!

Perhaps some of the answer is in the simple story we heard a moment ago - the story of two men being called to go with a man who must have moved and inspired them. He did not ask them to go home and return with weapons of war; he did not promise them wealth or power. He simply said he would have them come with him to catch people rather than fish.

Obviously as the months of Jesus' ministry unfolded, Andrew and Peter learnt much - even if they had perhaps dreamed of a Judea free of Romans, they soon learnt that their mission was very different. It was to move through the country telling the good news of the coming of a kingdom – not a temporal kingdom but one of God.

The group Jesus gathered round him were, in some ways a motley band - all from very different backgrounds yet bonded together in a community with a common vision. Men and women travelled together and in the centre of them all was Jesus. The group must have been recognised everywhere they went and we know that many came from near and far to hear Jesus. It was this group that shared that final supper together as friends do.

However it appeared this community was shattered into many pieces after Jesus' death. The presence that had held them together was no longer there. We know that the group were demoralised and indeed looked at returning to their homes believing that the call to which they had responded was no longer to be heard.

Of course we know that Easter morning changed everything.

Matthew's gospel ends with Jesus telling them to go and make disciples of all nations; in John's gospel we hear of Jesus coming to them in a locked room and breathing upon them the gift of the Holy Spirit.

This group was drawn back together again - a community of people filled with the Holy Spirit and with a vision of heaven revealed on earth. This vision would take them to the farthest corners of the earth as indeed happened to Andrew. However we also know that many who had been part of the Jesus movement remained in Jerusalem as a visible presence there.

However it was those who went out to the farthest points of the world and in many cases died for their faith, who became the first saints of the church. In their lives they drew people to them; helped create Christian communities across the known world. In their deaths they became symbols of courage and hope in the many adversities that these communities were to face.

Perhaps this is – at least in part – an answer to my question about St Andrew remaining part of the history of Scotland even after the grief and pain which was so much part of the history of the Reformation. Although no longer an intermediary between God and Christian men and women, he remained a symbol of the courage and hope they needed to survive. As they heard the story in their own language for the first time Andrew's story of responding to Jesus call became their challenge too.

And so to the present; to the other part of my question - is there a place for St Andrew in your life; in mine ? I cannot answer for you and I would guess that your answer will partly come from your own Christian formation.

For all my deep love of ritual, sign and symbol, there is at least a part of me that would no doubt delight my brave but extremely unlucky ancestor. I do not need a saint to be my guardian or my intermediary with God. The gift I receive as I reflect on the lives of the named saints of the church is in their examples of courage, of wisdom and of a sense of calling as I help build new communities of faith.

These saints will be a pointer, a sign for those who continue to hear the call of Jesus today. Some will continue to go to the farthest points of the earth building new communities of faith. Guided by a spirit of love and compassion - the Holy Spirit truly revealed – they will reveal something of the love that I think must have shone forth from Jesus as he drew those first disciples to him.

Others will shine like beacons in the places in which they were born and continue to live. The Holy Spirit will also be at the centre of all they do and the fruits of their work will be revealed in the lives of the men and women who, in response to their presence, come together to worship, to learn and to care for each other.

Perhaps the best answer to my question about St Andrew's place in my life is found in the wonderful words of the song we sang before the gospel. Like Andrew we need to say yes to God's call to us. It will challenge and transform us both as individuals and as communities of faith. As we move into the future those like Andrew will go with us as a light leading us on.

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