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You Did Not Choose Me (John 15. 12-17)

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How strange to be here with you all!

Don't get me wrong! I'm delighted and excited to see you, to embark on a new year together. But what an odd way to spend part of Saturday evening. Around us, people are cooking dinner or going to the movies, meeting friends, watching telly, finishing off an afternoon in the garden, doing the grocery shopping. And here we are – listening to readings from an ancient, rather cryptic text, singing songs we sing nowhere else, preparing to sit in silence for an extended period, praying and (despite everything) proclaiming blessing. Strange practices – whose importance and meaning we are able to trust, sometimes, only by the skin of our teeth, with fragile hope. Strange practices – in whose importance and meaning we are asked to believe, not just for ourselves but for the whole world. But how?

Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor has written a monumental book about our times, called *A Secular Age*. There was a time, he says, when 'it was virtually impossible not to believe in God', but our age is one where for many people 'faith never even seems an eligible possibility', so that 'even for the staunchest believer' it can be difficult 'to sustain one's faith'.¹ Perhaps all of us know that experience at least some time in our lives. Yet here we are – seeking to be true to something, to someone – glimpsing, hoping, *knowing* that in these scriptures and in prayerful openness to the God to whom they testify there is nourishment for life and the promise of deep, healing encounter with reality.

¹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 3.

In the weeks following Christmas (the season of Epiphany in the church's calendar), it's customary to read the stories of Jesus calling his disciples. This is pretty much the first thing that happens in the gospels, after Christmas and the narrative of Jesus' baptism and temptation. In the gospel of Mark, we hear: 'As Jesus walked along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea – for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them "Follow me and I will make you fish for people"' (Mark 1. 16-17) In Mark, the call of the sons of Zebedee, James and John, follows; and Luke mentions next the calling of Levi the tax collector, while John reports the recruitment of Philip and Nathanael (the Israelite with no guile).

And I wonder if our experience of the strangeness of faith is after all not so different from the experience of these first disciples. For all of them, the summons came as a break with culture and expectation – they were fishing and being good sons; tax collecting and being reviled by their community; or just guilelessly waiting for the Messiah. Their encounter with Jesus was unexpected, difficult to assimilate with 'normal' life, and presumably almost impossible to explain to their contemporaries.

According to the Scriptures, this in fact is precisely the mark of all authentic encounter with God. From Abraham uprooted from his tribal lands to Mary pregnant without explanation, from Sarah bearing a son in her old age to Paul interrupted on his way to a perfectly respectable lynching, God exceeds and confounds what is settled, known, understood, possessed. John sums up this dynamic of undomesticatable meeting with God in the words of Jesus to his disciples: 'you did not choose me but I chose you'. We are here for the same reason, because somehow, somewhere, Jesus called us to follow – because God chose us.

Except – I find myself resisting this language a bit and maybe you do too. On the one hand, it sounds too grandiose to relate to me ... me – chosen by *God* – I don't think so. And what's more it feels as though profound dangers lurk in this language of being chosen – in what has been called the doctrine of 'election'. The sense of

being called out, called to be different is so easily corrupted by a spurious sense of specialness and divine favour. Even the insistence that one is chosen to do good: ‘appointed to bear fruit’ (as John puts it), called as one through whom all the families of the earth will be blessed (as God tells Abraham) – even this hope of doing good can be corrupted. Think of nations and religious groups who’ve claimed such manifest destiny, chosen by God supposedly to civilise indigenous peoples, or maintain a new world order, or reclaim the holy land. How easily we can delude ourselves that we are doing God’s will, doing others ‘good’ while belittling, destroying and exploiting them. With less overt violence, the same sense of false superiority can permeate our church communities – after all, here we are, giving up our Saturday evening, chosen for the sake of the world, while all those unelected Philistines out there are at the movies!

So how, as a faith community, do we hear rightly this language of call and election?

In the gospels, being chosen does not define anyone over against others who are not chosen. Since God acts in and through human beings, some particular people need to be willing to respond, listen, and be transformed so as to become bearers of God to others. But there is no in principle reason why all cannot share this vocation. The stories of the calling of the first disciples seem to emphasise this. It’s not because of their religiosity, virtue or social standing that they earn their vocations, but simply because they respond to a call. Election (as the great Protestant theologian Karl Barth emphasised) is grace, gift – and the whole point of *anyone* hearing and responding to the call of God is that, through them, *everyone* may come to share in this very same responsiveness and gift. ‘Go and make disciples of all nations’, Jesus instructs his disciples at the end of Matthew’s gospel. We sometimes hear this as colonising – but might it not equally be heard as ‘give your “chosen-ness” away – invite everyone in’.

If that is right, then it follows that chosen-ness, election, is not a fixed characteristic of particular people or nations. It is not a possession and the minute we delude ourselves that it is, we fall into ideology and idolatry and their inevitable corollary – violence. We are called to be faithful to the *living* God, to the one who calls us new every morning, and what is crucial is our availability for live encounter – not just once, but over and over again.

And here's the important thing. Our being available for that live encounter, open to it, *does* require daring to trust that God could want to encounter us, might ask something of us. Despite all the dangers in the language of call, chosen-ness, election, it points to something necessary and true, something we refuse if we cover ourselves with so-called 'modesty' and attempt to slip through life as by-standers, on-lookers in God's work of reconciliation. *Someone* has to respond – in fact, the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas has argued that the very possibility of becoming someone, becoming a self at all, is founded in our responsivity, our willingness to be 'an identifiable responsibility, which is unsubstitutable'. We can't delegate this. It is powerfully expressed by the prophet Isaiah: 'Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!"' (Isa. 6.8)

This call to be a responsivity that is unsubstitutable goes for us personally. And it goes for our Benedictus community. Here I am. Here we are – gathered again, listening, offering ourselves, waiting on God ... as we yearn and fear and dare to believe that we too might be blessed to be part of the blessing of our beautiful, fragile, tormented world.

How strange to imagine that this applies to me, to you ...

How good it is to be here.