

It is a pleasure to be here with you tonight to celebrate your 150th anniversary. New College has been involved with the church in Romford since the college's founding in 1379, when Richard II sent the French monks of Havering priory scurrying back across the channel, and William of Wykeham saw his chance and seized the priory lands—all of the land around Hornchurch and Romford—to endow his new college in Oxford. So in a way I am the direct beneficiary of all of the land here.

On my way here tonight I stopped at another anglo-catholic parish in Hackney to have coffee with the vicar there. He asked what I was preaching about tonight, and when I said it was about getting up, leaving your nets, and following Jesus, he said to me, 'Isn't that a bit...evangelical?' It does sound a bit evangelical, but it is there in all of the readings we heard tonight. How beautiful are the feet of them that bring good news, the prophet tells us, and we are called to go out and share that good news.

This is the charge that was given to Andrew and Peter and James and John in our gospel story. Jesus found them by the lakeside, going about their business, and when he called to them to follow him, they got up, left their nets and followed him. It's the equivalent of walking out of the office without turning off your computer, much less handing in your resignation. They left their nets, and they followed him.

And that is what we, as adults called by Christ, are asked to do, and what your church, here on its 150th anniversary, and every day of its life, is called to do. Jesus finds us where we are, going about our business, mending our nets, and he calls us to follow him. And we leave our nets, and we follow him.

Or do we? Of course, I know that very few of us, in a practical sense, are asked to leave behind everything we own and everyone we love to follow Jesus. That is even more true of congregations: on this 150th anniversary of your church's foundation, it would be a bold choice to sell all the parish assets, lock the doors, and go out to preach in the streets of Essex, but perhaps not a very wise one. Someone has to open the doors and keep the place warm(ish) and tidy and welcoming, just as many of those in the early church, and even some of Jesus's own followers, stayed in their

homes and their jobs and followed Jesus by sheltering their fellow believers, and offering their wealth and their service to the kingdom. But even those early home-bound Christians, the Marthas and Dorcas and Ananias (who sheltered Paul after his conversion), took risks, and made sacrifices, that few of us can contemplate in our comfortable lives, here in suburban London. Even those of us who have taken solemn vows of service rarely, if we're honest, risk everything, or even anything, to follow Jesus. There's always the mortgage, the children to see through university, that promotion we've been striving after, a retirement fund to build up. Teachers and office workers, tradespeople and stay-at-home mums and dads and grandmums, churchwardens and clergy, we all have our nets to mend, things that seem to be our means to a better life, but that in reality tie us to desires that will never satisfy, and keep us from becoming the people that God imagines us to be.

So what does it mean for us, in southeast England in 2012, busily fishing in our careers and our hobbies and our day-to-day cares and concerns, to get up, leave our nets, and follow Jesus? I think perhaps the answer lies in a phrase that we will hear often in the coming weeks: 'Fear not.' When we hear God calling us as our heart stirs on a Sunday morning, or as someone in need looks into our eyes, or even unexpectedly, in the midst of writing a report or doing the washing up, in that precious moment we have a glimpse of the fullness of God's love. But when that warm feeling fades, a cold breath of fear often creeps in. Where is God taking me? What will become of my nets if I leave them behind? What would I be without them?

The fear isn't irrational. God does ask us to take a risk, a momentous risk, and he even promises that there will be hard times along the way. But he also promises that he will make us more than we have been. St Ignatius says that God sees each of us as a sculptor sees a piece of stone: past the rough surfaces and sharp edges, the sculptor sees the beautiful form coming forth, and draws it out with her hammer. God's calling to us by the lakeside is a calling to our better nature, to leave behind the nets that bind us to our sad, mean, sinful earthly selves, and to grow into the

reflection of God that was present at our first creation. Jesus finds us as fishers; he sends us out as more than he found us, he sends us out as fishers of men.

This is the calling to each of us personally, the calling that goes out to us tonight, and each and every time Jesus finds us, going about our business, watching the clock or Strictly Come Dancing. It is also the calling to your church of St Andrew, the first-called, tonight on its anniversary feast, and every day in its lifetime. To get up, and leave your nets, and follow him. To let go of worries about the state of the roof or the lack of older children, or perhaps any children at all, or the age of your congregation, and trust in God as you throw open your doors to his people.

Last weekend I had an e-mail from one of our first year students wanting to know more about the path to ordination. 'I've recently started to realise,' he wrote, 'just how overwhelming my love for Jesus is and what He means to me.' This is a boy on the cusp of manhood who wants to leave his nets, put away the fish, and follow Jesus. Reading his e-mail made me realise how self-conscious I've become as an adult; you're unlikely to catch me talking so unguardedly, even in private, about my overwhelming love for Jesus. And yet this youthful trust is what we are called to, again and again, throughout our lives. At 150 years old, your church of St Andrew the first-called in Romford may seem like a firm foundation. But there was a chapel of St Andrew in Romford way back in 1177, not 150 but almost 850 years old, and if Jesus had walked in this green and pleasant land he would have done so almost two millennia ago. You are young whippersnappers by comparison, and on this your birthday Jesus is calling you to come of age, with youthful enthusiasm to get up, leave your nets, and follow him.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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