
The Ten Letter Word

Luke 5.1-11

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on February 4, 2007 by the Revd Canon Dr Sam Wells

Many theologians, most famously John Calvin, have seen Jesus' ministry as rooted in identifiable Old Testament roles. They point out that Israel was led to God by prophets, priests and kings. Thus Jesus was a prophet (especially in his life) a priest (especially in his death) and a king (especially in his resurrection).

When we turn to today's gospel passage in Luke, the same threefold office helps us understand what is going on. Jesus exercises a prophetic ministry by offering words of compassion and hope and calling on Peter, James and John to respond. He exercises a priestly ministry by depicting and embodying the life to which he calls his disciples. And he offers a kingly ministry by showing his command over the forces of creation in the extraordinary catch of fish.

Since I've been living in America I've discovered there are a number of words we don't use here if we are going to be welcome in polite society. One of those terms is a ten-letter word that is my subject today. The word is evangelism.

We don't use the word because it seems arrogant to suggest we have a truth others don't have. We don't use the word because it sounds aggressive, insensitive, and coercive to imply that others must be more like us. We don't use the word, perhaps, because we are so often embarrassed by the failures of our own tradition that we hesitate to commend it wholeheartedly. We don't use the word because we simply don't like to be associated with some of the people who do. After all, who wants to be labeled as a cultural imperialist?

I want to suggest that we shouldn't stop using the word, but we must grow more careful about the way we do use it. And the way to be more careful is to distinguish between three kinds of evangelism – what I'm going to call prophetic evangelism, priestly evangelism and kingly evangelism.

Let's start with prophetic evangelism. "Prophetic" is a much-used word in the American church. What I understand it to mean is this. It means placing an individual, and institution or a situation in the light of God's story. That means recalling that all people are made in God's image, that God has called us into a covenant relationship with him, that he has shown us his very self in Jesus and that he will finally end the story by rolling righteousness down like an never failing stream. The prophet calls people to locate their identity and transform their conduct in accordance with this unique story. The prophet knows that we can't become a better world without us needing to become better people. Thus behind every plea to end the death penalty or to improve treatment for factory workers or change our nation's foreign policy lies a call to conversion – a call for those in authority to turn from their ways and live.

The prophet points people to God. When our docents show visitors around Duke Chapel they say "Look at that window, look at the expression on Lazarus' face." The prophet says "Look at that community, that's how God wants people to live." But the prophet also points out to the world that it is the world, and that it isn't the Church. The prophet says the American constitution is a fine thing, but it's not a part of the Bible. The prophet says confidence in the legal system is a vital part of our culture, but it can't give you what Jesus says matters most, which is forgiveness and reconciliation.

Prophetic evangelism speaks primarily to those outside the church. But the second approach, priestly evangelism, principally addresses those inside the church. It seeks to shape a personal and communal life that imitates the pattern of Christ's work. Such a form of life hopes to thrill the imagination of any who might come into contact with it. Priestly evangelism realizes that words are not enough. There must be actions to match. In today's gospel from Luke 5 Jesus doesn't just call Peter and friends to follow him: he does something that depicts the transformation he is talking about. St Francis famously said "Preach the gospel at all times: use words if you have to." Congregations aspire to become parables of the kingdom, which draw strangers and even enemies to wonder at the hope that is in these people's hearts. But priestly evangelism is not restricted to the congregation. By being rooted in neighborhoods and committed to unselfconscious lives of service,

congregations come to form partnerships across faith and other barriers to “seek the welfare of the city” and to learn from others the “paths that lead to peace.”

So priestly and prophetic evangelism aren't alternatives. They work together. Priestly evangelism is concerned with giving prophetic evangelism something to point to, with providing a kind of exhibit A to demonstrate what the grace of God can do. Prophetic evangelism is concerned to engage the kinds of people priestly evangelism is often too timid or self-effacing to talk to. The priestly makes the prophetic less strident; the prophetic makes the priestly less complacent.

The third kind of evangelism is kingly evangelism. For most of church history, certainly since the fourth century, the church has perceived or been offered the prospect of rule, a significant or dominant role in the ordering of society. Such a prospect has always been tempting, because it seems such an ideal vantage point from which to point to God's ways to maximum effect and embody God's life to maximum extent. The prospect of rule has so often been so tempting to the church that it has seldom been resisted. But its effects have invariably been a disaster.

Within a hundred years of becoming the official religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century, Christian identity went from being illegal to being obligatory. The church became voluntarily captive to an agenda that had little to do with prophetic witness to God's mercy or priestly embodiment of God's grace but everything to do with social control. When the Reformation made that social control problematic (because there were now several kinds of Christianity), few seriously considered giving up on the social control: instead they found military or political means to preserve it. This was the Europe many early settlers in America were fleeing – and yet so many reproduced here the same kingly evangelism they had left behind. Meanwhile later, in Africa, so much damage was done by identifying evangelism with social domination by western powers that it's taken the African church many decades to begin to repair the damage.

Let me be quite clear what I mean by kingly evangelism. I don't mean speaking the truth about God in public places, even in spheres of government. That's integral to prophetic evangelism. I don't mean seeking to create and shape institutions around a generous, hospitable practice of worship, learning and service. That's a healthy outworking of priestly evangelism. What I mean by kingly evangelism is when Christians enforce conformity to what they perceive as Christian norms from people who are not Christians and have no desire to be. It's when what should be an offer, an encouragement, a gift, becomes an expectation, an assumption, a requirement. If the norms they were imposing were love, joy peace, patience, kindness and so on it wouldn't be a serious problem but we all know it's never been like that. Instead history provides a litany of examples of how in the name of Christianity those with power have driven through social agendas that were distinctly lacking in goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

What's wrong with this isn't simply that it's undemocratic or unjust, although it sometimes has been. It's that it's deeply damaging for the church. It makes the church invisible, because the church becomes simply a means to the end of a society pressed into a certain kind of social straightjacket. It discredits priestly and prophetic evangelism, because those who can't or won't embrace the joy of God in Christ stop listening to any kind of evangelism once they get a sniff that it's really a mechanism for social control. And it's hard to blame them, because one of the most depressing features of kingly evangelism is that the living, dying, rising Jesus Christ tends to disappear out of the picture. For example, I'd have more sympathy with those people demanding that certain so-called Christian principles be taught in schools if those principles were “You must always strive to forgive those who have deeply hurt you” and “You must never give up the hope of reconciliation even when your people and another people have been in unequal or hostile relations for generations”. But somehow we never hear about those kinds of principles, maybe because kingly evangelism is seldom really about much that resembles Jesus at all.

It's all these things that have made evangelism a dirty word in polite society today. Kingly evangelism has been such a destructive force, still so much in fashion in certain quarters (and nowhere more so than in this country), that even faithful, devoted followers of Jesus Christ are in many cases reluctant to be drawn into the priestly and prophetic dimensions of evangelism because of the history of kingly excesses. The temptation is to go in one of two directions. The “prophetic” temptation is to maintain the evangelistic fervor, but to take out the distinctively Christian elements of the story. Hence one shouts about peace, justice and human dignity but

goes quiet about Jesus. The Christian story of creation, covenant, Christ, Church and consummation is replaced by a story of how privilege and ignorance are replaced by progress and equality. The “priestly” temptation on the other hand is to disappear into secluded Christian enclaves, not harming anyone but not benefiting anyone either, burying the talent of Christian hope in the hillside of cultural inhibition.

So what’s to be done? I want just briefly to draw out four lessons from today’s gospel to suggest how the Church may restore its confidence in priestly and prophetic evangelism and give the world more confidence that the Church has no kingly ambitions.

Lesson One, Jesus already knew Peter, James and John. His prophetic call was based on an existing priestly relationship. The time for sharing faith is almost always after a relationship of trust has already been formed. This means evangelism is as much about listening as it is about speaking. The evangelist must expect to be changed as well as to change others.

Lesson Two, Peter’s immediate reaction in the face of Christ’s majestic power is “I am a sinful man!” We, the Church, must repent. We must repent of the ways our message has been distorted and not pointed to the glory of Christ. We must repent of the way our common life has been disordered and been a poor example of the grace of Christ. But most of all we must repent of the way we have claimed Christ’s kingship as our own and distracted, damaged and destroyed others in the name of godly rule. In particular we have to recognize that it seems impossible to many, perhaps most, Jews to hear the word evangelism without assuming it means coercive kingly evangelism, because they’ve been exposed to so much of it so destructively for so long. Hence I think it’s hard to imagine a time in the foreseeable future where Christians can expect Jews to listen to any prophetic evangelism, except perhaps from those themselves born Jews.

Lesson Three, Jesus’ analogy of the disciples becoming fishers of people makes us wonder about the nature of fishing. No one ever said you go fishing for the sake of the fish. Evangelism is not fundamentally undertaken because it’s good for those seeing and hearing (although that’s always the hope) but for the sake of the Church. It’s not judged on whether it makes the Church more numerous, but on whether it makes the Church more faithful. A church that doesn’t evangelize will disappear into platitude or subside into complacency.

Lesson Four, Peter, James and John left everything and followed Jesus. The shape of the story is that they had nothing, then miraculously Jesus gave them far more than they needed, after which they were content to have nothing. What they discover in the story is that if you have Jesus, and the abundant life he brings, you don’t need anything else. This tells us that evangelism is serious business. It takes everything we are and everything we have. And the Jesus we share is not our possession but is always out in front, always beyond our domestication. One of many things wrong with kingly evangelism is that it seems to say, “You do all the changing. You need to become like me.” Prophetic and priestly evangelism by contrast say, “he’s the one I’m following. It’s cost me everything but it’s more than worth it. Would you like to come too? You can help me, and maybe I can help you.”

So as we read Luke 5 today there’s good news and bad news. The bad news is evangelism has become a dirty word in our culture, and it’s the church’s fault, for allowing faith-sharing to get mixed up with an unhealthy desire for social control. It’s a legacy that’s going to take a long time to live down. The good news is evangelism doesn’t have to be a dirty word. There’s nothing oppressive or arrogant or manipulative or imperialistic about striving to shape a community of worship, learning and humble service and drawing attention to such a community and its source of life when others become curious. The real news is without evangelism there’s no church and there’s no discipleship.

We just need to remember this simple lesson. The Church is a prophet and a priest that points to a king. But the only king is Christ.