

**Preacher:** The Rev'd Robert Hay

**Place:** Grovely Parish

**Date:** 9 and 10<sup>th</sup> February 2019

**Readings:** Isaiah 6. 1-8

1 Corinthians 15. 1-11

Luke 5. 1 -11

### **A SISTER WENDY TOUR**

Sometime over the Christmas break, I read the news that Sister Wendy Beckett had died. Sister Wendy was an extraordinary woman. She came to prominence in a series of short British television programmes on art, whereby you would see Sister Wendy leave her caravan, dressed in her full nun's habit, for she was a catholic contemplative nun. You would then see her going into some world famous art gallery, and stand in front of a painting and begin to speak about this artwork. This woman always fascinated me. In five minutes she would have opened your eyes to this painting, explaining the ideas, which the artist was trying to express, telling you about the artist and the times they lived. What I valued most about Sister Wendy is she encouraged you to look thoughtfully at a painting. She wanted you to spend time with the painting, and allow the painting to interact with you.

Well today I want to do a Sister Wendy for you, if that is possible. I want you to think of today's three readings, as three different paintings.

I want you to look at these painting, and allow the painting, to interact with you. So let us imagine we are not in a church this morning, but in a world famous art gallery. We are going on a Sister Wendy tour this morning.

In your imagination, think that you have just entered a room in this famous, art gallery. You see a sign, as you come into the room with the title: "The C room." A helpful art director has put a note on the wall for us to read. "The C room" we are told is a grouping of three paintings on a common theme. The theme is conversion, commitment, and commissioning, as each of these words starts with the letter "C", this is why the room is called, "The C room." At least we have some idea what these three paintings are about.

The three paintings in our imaginary room are rather special. They are like the paintings in a Harry Potter movie. The paintings move, and you can have a series of scenes within the same picture frame.

The first painting we come to is the Isaiah painting. This is a large, dramatic work, full of colour and movement. At the centre of the picture, in brilliant light, is God sitting on a throne, surrounded by swirling winged creatures. There is something awesome and overpowering about this central figure. As your eye moves around the picture, you see that the picture is a smoke filled room, and standing to the side of the image of God is the figure of the man Isaiah, dressed in the robes of a priest. As you look at this figure of Isaiah, you realized he is overwhelmed by this vision of the divine. He realizes, he is in the presence of the fully holy, and his response is one of apprehension and concern. Then the scene changes, at the behest of God, a winged creature touches Isaiah's lips. He now has a sense of being cleansed and renewed. His fear has gone. When asked who will do the work, which God requires to be done, Isaiah with confidence and boldness declares; "Here I am, send me."

How we move to the second picture in the room, the Luke picture. This is a gentler picture. It's a lake scene, in the hills round about are houses and fields. A large crowd is gathered on the lakeshore, and there are two figures in a boat. One is sitting down speaking to the attentive crowd, while the other figure is standing in the boat, with nets around his feet. A note by the painting tells us that the figure speaking is Jesus, and the one standing is the local fisherman called Simon. The note also says that these two men were well known to each other, for Jesus had recently healed Simon's mother-in-law of a fever.

Our picture now changes, the fisherman Simon is struggling to gather in his net, which he has just cast into the water. It is so full of fish that others are coming to help him. Simon is now stopping what he was doing. He has a look on his face, like the look that Isaiah's face had, in the first picture, a look of apprehension and concern. Simon has a realization that he in the presence of the fully holy. He has the realization that the figure speaking to him is more than man; the figure has the quality of the divine about him. Simon, using the title Lord - the title used for God, says to Jesus; "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a

sinful man. But Jesus calms his fear and said, “Do not be afraid from now on you will be a gatherer of people. Then Simon and the other fishermen leave the lake, and their boats, and gather around Jesus, as he walked away.

The third picture is the Paul picture. It’s a picture of Paul sitting at a desk, writing on a piece of parchment. His eyes are however focused on another image within the picture. This image is of a large number of figures gathered around Jesus, but the Jesus they are gathered around is the Resurrection Jesus, who shows the signs of his crucifixion on his body. In this picture, there is a smile on the face of Paul, for he realizes that while he once persecuted the Christian community now he is a gatherer of the Christian community. Paul now devotes his life to proclaiming the uniqueness of Jesus, and the importance of Jesus’ resurrection. He devotes himself to gathering, the believers in Jesus together, into new communities of faith.

My Sister Wendy sermon has looked at our three pictures in our imaginary room. I think Sister Wendy, who was a woman of insight, faith and intelligence, would want us to look very thoughtfully at our pictures. She would want us to take something from the pictures, which helps us in our Christian lives. What message do these three paintings give us? One message is a reminder that God is active in people’s lives. When we look at these three painting, we realize that God took the initiative in the life of Isaiah, Simon and Paul. If nothing else, we can be encouraged by these three biblical figures, and say that as God used them, so God also can use us for his good and holy purposes.

A second message that comes from these pictures is the importance of valuing and nurturing holiness. I remember John Grindrod, a former Archbishop of Brisbane, who was a man of strong faith, lamenting the loss of reverence and awe that he felt was sometimes missing at worship. He reminded us that when we are gathered together for worship we are a holy people, touching holy things, doing holy work. He reminded us that we should enter worship, not as entertainment but as coming closer to the presence and power of God in our midst. In the Isaiah picture, you get this sense of awe and reverence, when Isaiah experienced God in the temple. In the Luke picture, you get this

sense of surprise and reverence, when Simon grasps the divine, which is associated with Jesus. In the Paul picture you get this sense of awe and reverence that Paul associated with Jesus and Jesus' resurrection. Paul's life was changed completely, by his experience of meeting the resurrection Jesus on the road to Damascus.

Yes, when we gather together to worship, we come with an attitude of reverence and awe, for we are indeed in a holy place, doing holy things, and we are being changed into a holy people by our time together.

These three pictures give to us one final message. They remind us we are a gathered community. Like the image of the net in the Luke picture, which gathers together a harvest of fish, we are a people gathered together. The net that brings us together can be understood in at least two ways. We are firstly gathered together by our common faith in Christ, and our common desire to be used by God for his good and holy purposes. But we are also gathered together, by the love and grace that God has for each of us. It is this love and grace that binds us together, to be God's people in this world.

I would leave you with one final thought, when thinking about this net of God's grace and love that binds us together. This net that binds us together is not a restricting net. It is in fact the very opposite. It is a liberating net. It is an upholding net, which says, live your life in the knowledge that God is with you, upholding and strengthening you with his love and grace. As you live your life in this net of God's love and grace, you will experience a change in your life. You will experience a growing awareness of God, and a growing delight in the things of God, like prayer, Christian study, meditation, and worship together. The change that will happen in your life is the growth of that most wondrous of qualities; the growth of holiness in your life.

And now, our Sister Wendy tour of our imaginary art gallery room is finished.

It seems appropriate to finish this sermon by returning to that happy hymn, which we sang at the beginning of our service.\* This hymn reminds us that when come to worship, we are a community of diverse people, gathered together in the presence of Christ Jesus.

So let us pray:

Lord, gather us in, and hold us forever,  
gather us in, and make us your own,  
gather us in, all people together  
for you are the fire of love, in our flesh and our bones. Amen

\* Hymn 474 "Gather us in" From "Together in Song" hymnbook