

Well, that was quite a career change! One minute, Peter, James and John were fishermen; the next they had 'left everything and followed Jesus'.

Looking back, my career change was not quite so sudden. Twenty-two years ago I was still working for Nissan. From the initial sense of call it took over a year before I reached the point of walking away from the familiarity of the world of engineering. Then began a six-year training process before I could embark on my new career.

If I was still at Nissan right now I imagine I would be wondering about the future security of my job. And as we all know, locally there are many people for whom this is very much a reality. But let me offer some hope – in the form of one of the core values of the Nissan Motor Company: 'Kai-Zen' or Continuous Improvement.

At the Sunderland manufacturing plant each stage of the production process is constantly reviewed – principally by the production line workers themselves – with incremental improvements continuously introduced. The same goes for the product design. My job was mainly to monitor the market for quality issues and coordinate design changes. Overall, these small improvements would then lead to major changes each time a new product was introduced. The Kai-Zen philosophy means that a current Nissan is a much better quality car than one from twenty-two years ago! And in case you're wondering, I now drive a Mazda! (But please understand that Mazda are another company with that same philosophy!)

Kai-Zen applies as much to Nissan workers as it does to Nissan cars. Through ongoing training and by a deepening and broadening of their experience Nissan staff have levels of skill and adaptability which enable them continuously to grow towards their potential.

Another big local employer with this same outlook is the Army. The other day, I was privileged to be part of a clergy group who were given a tour of Catterick Garrison. We heard that whereas Nissan may be in danger of finding itself with too many employees the Army is currently seeking to recruit several thousand more. New recruits and serving personnel alike receive training and investment shaped to enable individuals to become the 'best they can be'. Indeed, Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers are so well-trained, so adaptable, that they are constantly being head-hunted by civilian employers!

It is worth mentioning here that the 'Armed Forces Covenant' is designed to

enable all serving personnel and their families to enjoy the same rights, privileges and responsibilities as any other member of society. It comes in to its own when individuals reach the end of their term of service and re-enter society. So as a major 'presence' in our local community the Army wants community relations at all levels to be on a good footing. And such links have to be a two-way street: the Army actively seeks our goodwill.

Now from all that I would like to draw out three points. First, for any of us, in real life nothing stays the same. Second, the principle of 'Continuous Improvement' applies as much to people as it does to products – and it is therefore important for us always to be intentional about our personal growth. Third, if we are to become the 'best we can be' then this brings responsibilities as well as rights and must involve engagement with all those amongst whom we live and work.

I am sure you are ahead of me as I suggest that these points surely apply to the Church: the Church as a whole, the local church to which we belong, and each individual member – you and me.

So let's take a look at today's gospel reading, and see what Jesus and Peter are doing. Jesus enters the 'real life' of the fishermen: he needed their help in order to do his work. By teaching the crowd from Peter's fishing boat, set just off the shore, Jesus could address more people than would otherwise be the case. (And by the way, did you know that the origin of the word 'pulpit' is the Latin 'pulpitum' which was originally a raised platform on the bow of a fishing boat.) Having done his work, Jesus then makes a seemingly simple, undemanding suggestion to Peter to help him in his work – one which Peter almost rejects (Peter says, 'We have worked all night long but caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets'). What follows is a miraculous catch of fish! Peter's response to this abundant blessing from God is an instant recognition of his unworthiness ('Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!').

And this is the message of the gospel. It is the unworthy – the sinful – who God calls to fullness of life, not people who are already the finished article, the 'best they can be'. It is the unworthy who God calls to help him in building his peaceable kingdom here on earth. But first, we have to recognise ourselves to be in need of growth, of some 'continuous improvement'. As the theologian Mark Oakley observes, 'Spiritually, we see by first being seen. We love by first being loved'.

Oakley also says this: 'So Peter sees himself and repents before being the first disciple to be called. He becomes us, as it were, not least in his later betrayal of Jesus, too. Though the beginnings of our faith feel like a honeymoon and can be miraculous, we learn over time with Peter that conversion is a lifelong project. It has all the fulfilments and frustrations of a relationship, not a romance, with God'.

I invite you in these next few weeks before the season of Lent to be thinking how you can be intentional in seeking to grow – to improve – in your personal faith. And I invite us as a church community to be discerning how we can be fulfilling our responsibilities – our call – to make our presence in the wider community a force for good.

Let us pray.

Lord, help us to help you to build your kingdom here on earth. Amen.