

THE GREAT CATCH OF FISH – St Luke 5:1-11

The account of the great catch of fish, which we have just heard, has much to say to us about our own personal calling in Christ if we look more deeply at the details of the story. Jesus meets Simon and his partners, who include the sons of Zebedee, James and John, and asks them to put their boat out a little way from the shore. He teaches the crowds and then asks Simon to put out his nets into the deep for a catch. “We toiled all night and took nothing,” he replies to Christ’s command, “But at your word I will let down the nets.” And their obedience to their master after repeated failure brings unimaginable success in an apparently hopeless situation. The nets are breaking and the boat is beginning to sink under the weight of fish. Peter is overwhelmed by the enormity of the catch. The effect on him is utter amazement at the miracle which the Lord has performed and consequently he feels a deep sense of his own human weakness. He recognises that he is in the presence of something or rather somebody, who is much greater than him. He falls down at Jesus’ feet and cries, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord”. There is genuine fear here at the magnitude of what has taken place and the distance between himself and Christ is highlighted by the vision of God’s power. In the future he will also witness similar jaw dropping events which will have a life-changing effect on how he views his master when Jesus calms the storm around the sinking boat and when he glows with a light which cannot be looked upon on Mount Tabor. Here Jesus understands what he is feeling and comforts him with the words, “Do not be afraid. Henceforth you will be catching men”. Or in other words, “You too will be performing similar acts”.

This event like the subsequent ones has a profound effect on Peter and the sons of Zebedee and we are told, “They left everything and followed him.” The accounts of the Early Church in the Acts of the Apostles confirm Christ’s promise to Peter and the sons of Zebedee about catching men. Their work will have a dramatic impact on the Middle East in founding the Church and will culminate in Peter’s martyrdom in Rome. But it is important to point out that in the same way Christ has also called us to follow him and what that entails. It may not be so dramatic as this but it has happened in some way to all of us and is a clear indelible milestone in our spiritual lives in Christ. St Paul recounts in Galatians about how he received ‘a revelation of Christ’ to preach the gospel to the Gentiles; our late Metropolitan Anthony recounted to his dying day how as a teenager he experienced Christ’s presence across the desk as he reluctantly read Mark’s gospel. Each of us could recount some vision or event in our past when we experienced Christ’s presence in a new way, which fundamentally altered the direction of our lives and changed us in our attitude to Him. And in connection with this change St Paul says on at least two occasions that we were chosen in him before the foundation of the world or were set apart before we were born. “He is not very far from us” and “In him we live and move and have our being”, is what he tells the crowds in Athens, some of whom are looking for an “unknown god”. These life-changing experiences relate to our destiny in Christ too.

The parables of the Gospels and the accounts in the Book of Acts confirm that God is not just sitting idly by waiting for us to respond, rather that he is actively searching for us as we see in the story of Cornelius who is visited by an angel and told to seek out Peter. This action is echoed in the parable of the Prodigal Son when the Father takes the initiative and goes looking for his son, so great is his longing for him. It is he who invites himself into the house of Zacchaeus. We know that Christ calls us in a way that we cannot forget, as St Paul repeats his experience in his epistle, even when tested by sufferings and tempted to give up. But we are told that there is much more than this since He yearns jealously over the Spirit which he has made to live in us. The giving of the Holy Spirit is like a guarantee that the work which He has begun in us will advance to greater things if we are faithful to his calling. In the life of the disciples they will spend their days building and nurturing the Church of Christ through good times and bad, especially when the church is persecuted as it expands so rapidly after the departure of Christ to the Father. The disciples have much to learn as they travel with Christ. They have many misunderstandings, many wrong ideas about who the Lord is and what He has come to do on earth. Many of these things are corrected by events in His ministry. He has power over natural forces, storms, winds and water; he has power to heal, even raise the dead; and most importantly He has all authority on earth and in heaven even over death. And yet in the middle of this the disciples jockey for power; The mother of the sons of Zebedee wants them to be leaders of the group, another one exploits the group financially and betrays him to the authorities. The rest bar one run away in the time of crisis. But despite all this, Christ is faithful to them and reaffirms to Peter his vocation as supreme pastor of the Church after his resurrection.

If we are not greater than our Master as Christ asserts, or even than our leaders, we as servants must expect to see similar patterns in our spiritual development. It does not stop at an unforgettable experience of God. Our life in Him like the disciples in today's gospel leads us to ever deeper commitment. Just as we grow and mature as people we are taught to grow and mature in Christ through the workings of the Holy Spirit. We are called 'servants' by the Lord after himself who became a servant for us and called himself the 'Son of Man'. He taught us that it is more blessed to give than to receive and to imitate him in this life of service. This is what our vocation is all about. Denying oneself is not easy for any of us but it helps to prepare our hearts for the next stage of our spiritual journey. It helps to create that thirst for the living water of which Christ speaks, the realisation that nothing really matters ultimately except our relationship with our God, who is infinitely loving. The disciples responded with a willingness to follow Christ's path of service to the world in today's Gospel. May our hearts too be open to the call of Christ wherever and whenever it comes and be ready to respond like the prophet Isaiah when he is called, "Here I am. Send me".

23rd September 2018, Oxford