

“FISH!”

A Sermon at All Saints Church Wokingham by The Reverend Canon David Hodgson 10th February 2019 (Proper 1 Year C)

Gospel reading: S. Luke 5: 1 -11

Fish. Love ‘em or loath ‘em? Fish are in the news. They’re a flashpoint of our human conflict with each other and with our environment - from Brexit to pollution in the oceans. They’re also the staple diet for whole communities in some parts of the world. The fish and the communities who rely on them are both under threat. I watched an episode in a BBC TV series about Africa by Ade Adepitan, TV presenter and Paralympian athlete. In Senegal, 80% of the population depend on fishing- it’s central to its economy. People eat fish for breakfast lunch and dinner every day! It’s also the country’s biggest export. But there’s a problem. All along the West Coast of Africa, industrial fishing boats from Europe and Asia are scooping up more fish than the sea can produce. Most of the fish being caught industrially is going for processing as fish meal to feed pigs, cows and other farmed fish, for the tables of rich countries. Local fishermen are forced to work more and more hours for fewer returns, driving communities into poverty and marginalisation. Malnutrition is spreading throughout West Africa, which is driving migration. So, fish are on the frontline of the running tension between incessant growth in global consumption on the one hand and the sustainability of the earth as a viable human habitat on the other. The fish is rapidly becoming a potent symbol of the crisis now facing the global economic system, which is no longer fit for purpose and needs changes if the world is to avoid environmental turmoil and more significant harm to many people, communities and ecosystems.

There are connections between Christianity and fish. The gospel story we read today is one of them. The first disciples of Jesus were fishermen. Simon, James and John. And here we have a story of fishermen who worked all night without getting a catch. I imagine there’s more than a few Senegalese fishermen who could relate to how that feels right now.

A story of Jesus and a miraculously abundant catch of fish occurs twice in the four gospels. One is here in St Luke’s Gospel at the start of Jesus’ earthly work, and the other one is in St John’s Gospel at the end of Jesus’ physical appearances after his resurrection from the dead. We can let scholarly commentators debate whether they are based on two separate actual events. Both this story, and the one in John, are invitations - to a deeper trust in God, to follow Jesus, and by God’s loving acceptance of us, to be full participants in the ministry of Jesus Christ. The agenda of the ministry of Christ you recall had been set out in St Luke’s Gospel, in the chapter before this one. We read it as our gospel in church a couple of weeks ago and John Boylan preached about it. Jesus read this from the Book of Isaiah in the synagogue in his home town of Nazareth and then announced that he was to fulfil the ancient promise.

‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.’ (*S. Luke 4: 18-19*)

And later in that same chapter Jesus, explaining why he could not stay in one town only, summarised his ministry like this:

‘I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also; for I was sent for this purpose.’

This miracle of the abundant catch of fish is like some other signs and miracles of Jesus described in the gospels. The feeding of the crowd of five thousand with five loaves and two small fishes is also a miracle of abundance. All were fed, yet there were more left-overs collected at the end of the meal than there had been loaves and fishes to begin with. And recently I preached on the miracle of the water made into wine. Here again there was a huge abundance – this wasn't just a half-litre carafe on every table! This was six stone water jars each containing twenty or thirty gallons. And the wine was good. These signs are to help us to understand and to believe that God's grace and God's love are infinitely generous. There is nothing austere about God's provision. God's power and God's care are not depleted by God's provision; it is a source which is never exhausted.

So the message of the miraculous catch of fish is very similar to the message of those other miracles of abundance in the gospels. The message is about Jesus Christ. These miracles reveal the power and blessing of God present in Jesus. Jesus is the one who not only changes water into wine but also changes our lives and our communities. With Jesus there is a completely new and wonderful kind of relationship with God and with people too. This is a relationship based on grace – based on the undeserved blessing and favour which God has for us. The miracle of the feeding of the crowd revealed that the transforming power and presence of God is with us, and in us, in Christ. This is the good news and the gift that Christians and the church have to offer the world. And we must offer it boldly and confidently.

But let's return to the gospel for today – this miraculous catch of fish. The heart of the story is Simon's reaction to the miracle, and Jesus' response to Simon's reaction. When Simon saw the divine blessing present in Jesus by this miracle, Simon was "undone". He realised as a result of meeting Jesus and seeing God at work in him in a real way, that he Simon was no longer the person he had been or thought he was. No longer was he a self-contained life: his life, he saw, was no longer simply his own. His life, who he was, was part of a bigger pattern; his life he saw now related to God and to other people, he saw that his life and his being were sustained only in relationship with God, and with others, who were outside of his own control. He knew in this moment as he dropped to his knees before the Lord that he could no longer know himself outside of relationship with God and with others whom God also loves. But he is "undone", with shame or guilt, because even in that moment of realisation he held back and he cried out "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" Simon knew how strong would be his impulse to sabotage relationship with God and others for his own selfish ends. I believe that is why Jesus responded with those words "Do not be afraid" – a phrase which echoes through the Bible often on the lips of God's messengers – these were words of forgiveness, of acceptance of who he Simon was – as he was – and yet Jesus called him to join his ministry, to bring the good news of God's kingdom to people.

There is a nice play on the idea of Simon together with his friends James and John becoming fishers of people rather than of fish. In Luke the Greek word used is found in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures where it mostly has the meaning "taking alive" in the sense of rescuing someone from danger; such as a hostage victim or a person in a burning house, a sense of a mutual recognition by both the one catching and the one caught that this is a good thing to have happened! Which is not the invasive, non-consensual action that is suggested by the English word "fishing!"

Coming back to fish. If the fish is becoming a symbol now of environmental crisis – a time for actions to rescue the earth and many people from danger – it was before that a symbol of the hope we have in Christ. On the wall by the front door of my house I have a fish – a symbolic fish – like that some Christians use as car bumper stickers. It's a sign that says this house has something to do with Jesus Christ, to do with Christianity – it's the house where a Christian minister lives. Obviously, it not the usual symbol of Christ – the cross – but we considered the cross is a sign more suitable for a place of worship than a residential dwelling. In fact, the fish was the sign for Jesus from earliest Christian times, long before it became common to use the Cross.

The New Testament part of the Bible was first written in the Greek language.

The early Christians had a phrase to describe who Jesus is – in English it is “Jesus Christ Son of God Saviour” ; in the Greek language it is Iesous Christos Theou Uios Soter and if you take the first letter of each word of that phrase in Greek you get ICHTHUS – which is the Greek word for fish; hence the symbol. So the fish was a symbol of our hope in God long before it was associated with the unsustainability of the current global economy. That fish was also a reminder to Christians of our core faith about who Jesus is; of what God has done for us and for the world by what Jesus did. A sign to help us believe that God is working in this world, God is working in us in Christ; to encourage us to embrace by faith God’s purposes of love, peace and forgiveness, secured by what Jesus did.

Earlier this week your Parochial Church Council spent an hour talking about an activity described by another Greek word from the early days of Christianity. This was catechesis. Let’s not be fearful of a technical word. Every field has technical words, the church and Christianity is no different. What is catechesis? It’s an ancient word for an important set of activities or processes in church communities, which stretches all the way back to the earliest days of Christianity. Its original meaning is “instruction”. The activity of catechesis is the teaching of the Christian faith either to new adult disciples or to those who were baptised as children.

The Bishop of Oxford is re-introducing this word into the life of our churches in this diocese. He defines catechesis as “the formation of Christ in the believer in heart and mind”. In practice, it’s the whole cluster of activities around baptism preparation, foundation courses or groups in the basics of faith, confirmation preparation, family services, children’s work such as Junior Church, youth work, and adult Christian education. A bit like fish swim in water without knowing its water, let alone knowing its H₂O, many of us have been involved in activities under the umbrella of catechesis without knowing the technical term. Except that Bishop Steven is finding as he goes around our diocese that many local churches are not putting as much emphasis or support for that whole group of activities called catechesis as we need to be doing in order to help us as Christians to be bold and confident in our faith in these challenging times. Properly done, good catechesis is what enables us to rejoice in the Lord, because we know and we can say who we have faith in; what that faith means to us; what beliefs we hold as Christians, and how to describe them to others. It’s what enables us to fulfil with confidence and joy our part in Christ’s ministry to bring the good news of the kingdom of God. It is more than head knowledge about Christianity of course. It is finding out more and more about how God is with us.

Simon was undone in the face of the awesome miracle of the fish because he knew that he could not be part of the ministry of Christ to bring in the kingdom of God, until he knew too that God welcomed him as he was. And Jesus gave Simon that knowledge and extended that welcome. Jesus’ method of catechesis was to release Simon from self-concern and to give him that confidence that he was welcome. “Don’t be afraid. From now on you will be catching people”.

END

David Hodgson, February 2019