

5th Sunday of the year - C 2010

Some years ago I was on pilgrimage to the Holy Land, and we were taken across the Sea of Galilee on a fairly large launch. I remember that the water was a bit rough that day, and it recalled for me the time when Jesus was with the apostles on that same sea in a much smaller boat, and the waters got very ugly. While Jesus slept calmly in the bow, the apostles became terribly frightened, until he was awakened and he calmed the sea, and their fears. But on the day recorded in today's Gospel, the sea was calm, and Jesus, who had travelled that sea many times to travel to places where he would teach the crowds, was on that lake this day for quite another reason.

This event took place early in His public life, and it was to be the day on which he manifests to his chosen apostles what their vocation was all about, why they must leave everything and follow Him, even to the point of sacrificing their very lives. They were being called to leave this beautiful, almost idyllic place and way of life, where in one way some of them were involved in the fishing trade, and they were to become fishers of men.

The scene of this calling to become fishers of men is most wonderfully set forth in St. Luke's account. Jesus is first shown preaching to the crowds from a boat, and not just any boat, but St. Luke notes that he spoke from Peter's boat. These frequent mentions of the unique relationship between the Lord and Peter are not without significance: Peter pays the Temple tax for himself and Jesus with the same coin; Jesus stays at Peter's house; Jesus promises Peter that His faith will never again fail after he has recovered from His betrayal and he must in turn strengthen the other eleven, and through them the whole Church; and it is to Peter that the Lord will give the Keys of the kingdom in a special way outside Caesarea Philippi. But today Jesus chooses to preach from Peter's boat, an image that will become symbolic of the papal authority, and today Jesus will work the great miracle about to take place from Peter's boat.

After preaching to the crowd for some time, he tells Peter to set out into the deep water and lower his nets. It's a strange command, for it was daylight, and even to this day most fishing on that lake is done at night since the catches are not very good in the daytime hours. Moreover, Jesus has told them to lower the nets in the deep water, whereas their nets are normally employed in shallow waters where they can scrape the bottom and trap the fish. Peter, therefore had a double reason to doubt the wisdom of

this command, and he expresses his own confusion. But what matters here is that Peter obeys the Lord. "If you say so," Lord "I will lower their nets." In those words we can find the very definition of faith, "because you say so, Lord, I will act." Faith is not just assent to the Word of God, but involves acting on that assent, "because you say so, it must be true, and because you say so, I will act on that truth, I will live by that truth." Peter is a man of faith already; he is about to become a fisher of men.

What follows is the miraculous catch of fish due to the command of the Lord, whose dominion extends to the depths of nature as well as the depths of the human heart. The miracle provides not only a marvelous compensation for their previous night's poor catch, but it also provides a marvelous parable meant to teach the Apostles about the vocation they are called to by Jesus. From now on they are to be His Apostles, sent by Him to catch men, just as he sent them that day into the deep waters of Lake Galilee to catch fish. Moreover, their success will depend upon their absolute fidelity to His Word, to His command, for he alone knows what is in the hearts, that is, in the depths of the hearts of those whom they are sent to catch for His Kingdom. Their power is in their faith in Him and their complete submission to His commands, with total confidence in His power over the deep waters of human nature, His capacity to bring the catch to them, when and where He chooses, just like the fish that day that he gathered for their nets on the Sea of Galilee.

Peter's reaction to the miracle is also recorded because it too is part of the instruction on apostleship that Jesus gave that day. Peter, recognizing the divine power in Jesus, draws back because he now recognizes, perhaps as never previously in His life, what a sinful man he is in comparison to the one who sits in His boat. "Depart from me Lord, I am a sinful man." in other words, Lord I am not worthy to be in your presence for now, in your presence, I recognize how I myself am a sinful man. Jesus' response is wonderful: "Do not be afraid." And then, I will make you a "fisher of men." In other words, lest Peter should think he is incapable of this, Jesus assures him, "I will not only produce the catch I am sending you to gather, but I also will make you the kind of man you have to be to serve me fruitfully in this work."

Like the Seraphim who purified the unclean lips of Isaiah with a burning coal so that Isaiah could be the Prophet of the Lord, so Jesus would purify Peter's whole being, not just his feet - recall the Last Supper - but his lips, his heart, his soul and his body. Jesus would enable Peter to be washed clean in the bath of regeneration, and Jesus

would seal that purity in the cauldron of suffering for His name that would be Peter's lot along with all whom Jesus called to serve Him. With that assurance, because of those words, "be not afraid," these men of Galilee left everything, and became his followers.

We have all been called by Jesus to serve Him in the Church, and today, as in the past, he tells us to set out into the deep waters of this troubled world, and lower our nets. To us who live at the beginning of the Twenty-first century with all its rebellion against God and His Church, this may seem as crazy today as it seemed to Peter when the Lord told him raise the anchor and set out into the deep waters of Galilee for a catch that day. To us who are, like Isaiah, men of unclean lips, and like Peter, sinful human beings, we might honestly ask just how well suited we are to carry out this task for the Lord. But he says to us too, each in our own state of life in the Church, to priests and religious and to laity, married and single, "Do not be afraid." It is not your strength or weakness that matters, but your faith. If you believe in my word, and act upon it, I will bring about your own purification and the marvelous catch you may think impossible in a world filled with skepticism, relativism and even contempt for religion and for God. But, "do not be afraid." Just Follow me.

Do we then have faith sufficient "to leave everything" and follow Him, as Peter and the others he called then put everything aside and followed him. That is do we have faith sufficient to put all we have and all we are at His disposal, into His service, and follow him, *according to the state of life to which He has called us* to serve Him. Certainly, what that requires concretely from a lay disciple will be different in kind from that of a religious or priest who have no family, no dependents, but it cannot be different in degree – it must mean *everything*, if one is to follow Him, if one is to a fruitful laborer in His vineyard, our families, the world around us. By our Baptism all are given sufficient faith to make that choice to follow him, in whatever state he calls us to, in whatever circumstances we find ourselves. If we respond with generosity, like Peter and the eleven, but also like Martha and Mary and countless lay disciples as well, then His gift of faith to us will result in a marvelous and surprising catch for the Lord. If not, then we will be left behind, and someone else will be given the joy of the catch that could have been ours, had we only responded with the faith he gave us. That will be a cause of sadness for us, if not for the world. May we choose to follow Him.