

Lent Compline Talks 2017

Faith in and at Work

St Mary's Kidlington
Palm Sunday, 9th April
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Fishermen

This week, in this series of short addresses on work and faith, I want us to think about fishermen.

There's rather little reference to fish or fishermen in the OT: the Israelites were a desert rather than a maritime people. They clearly knew about fishing but fish and fishing only appear in the texts rather late on. For example: in Ecclesiastes "For man knoweth not his time, as the fishes that are taken in a net, and as birds that are caught in a snare"; or in Habakkuk's prophesy about the Chaldeans who it seems were greatly feared and treated men like fish in the sea to be gathered up into a net as slaves. Both quotes echo a similar view of how uncertain are people's lives, both naturally and as a consequence of the actions of others. The people of Syria and South Sudan, not to mention those in Stockholm would surely echo that.

A fish does, of course, appear in the story of Jonah – who on receiving God's command to preach against their wickedness of the people of Nineveh, took fright and fled toward Tarshish (either Tarsus in Turkey (Paul's birthplace), or more likely Sardinia), taking a boat from Joppa (what we now call Jaffa, and then the principal port of Israel). God sent a great storm, the mariners cast lots to see which of them was the cause of the storm; Jonah pulled the short straw, and the mariners asked him what he had done to cause this terrible storm to occur. Jonah told them that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, and suggested that he should be thrown overboard. It's interesting that at first the mariners were reluctant to do this, and rowed all the harder, but when it became clear that all their efforts were in vain, Jonah was cast overboard and the tempest abated. The story then continues that the Lord had sent a great fish to swallow Jonah, and he was in the fish's belly for 3 days and 3 nights. From there he prayed fervently, and the Lord caused Jonah to be 'spewed out onto dry land'.

Whatever the origin of the story, the gospel writers clearly seized on this as a prophesy of Christ's entombment for 3 days and nights before his resurrection. For us, though, the important message is that, if we really feel that God is asking us to do something difficult, we will never be at rest until we have at least tried to do it and that, in all probability, God will give us the means beyond our expectation. Jonah did, of course, go on to preach to Nineveh which was then the largest Assyrian city in the world, the remains of which should still be visible on the outskirts of modern Mosul. There Jonah prophesied that, because of the wickedness of the city, it would be destroyed in 40 days. Alarmed by this, the local king covered himself with sackcloth and ashes and ordered the whole populace to fast, repent and pray for deliverance. God, we read, heard their cries and relented. Interestingly, this is one of the first occasions that we see the God of the Old Testament as being merciful rather than – as so often – destroying the unbelievers. Perhaps even more interesting for us is Jonah's reaction – he was "displeased exceedingly and very angry" that God hadn't fulfilled his prophesy of destruction. We would do well to remember God's mercy when we think that someone has "received the punishment they deserved for some crime"; only God knows what goes on in our mind and in that of those around us.

It is not till we get to the New Testament when the northern groups of Israelites were settled round the sea of Galilee, that fishermen and reference to fish and fishing are prominent in the bible. Jesus grew up in Nazareth, then a small village about half way between the sea of

Galilee and the coast, but now the capital and largest city in northern Israel, but he was clearly very familiar with the lake and there are many references to the lake and to places like Capernaum and Bethsaida on the lake shore. In Matthew we read that when Jesus heard that John the Baptist had been arrested, he left Nazareth and settled at Capernaum and from that day began to proclaim the message 'Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is upon you'. Walking along the lake shore he saw the brothers Simon and Andrew casting a net into the sea, and simply said to them "Come with me and I will make you fishers of men" and immediately they left what they were doing and followed Jesus. It was the same with the brothers James and John who were in a boat mending nets with their father Zebedee and a group of hired men; they too left everything and followed Jesus on his preaching, healing mission which drew enormous crowds.

What an amazing preacher and healer Jesus must have been; and what a magnetic personality. If you were to ask what sort of working people would be the most likely to join a religious movement, of the twelve apostles you might perhaps have picked Bartholomew, who was said to be a scholar of the law and prophets (but maybe not – too academic!); you might also have picked Jude, Simon and Judas all of whom were said to be religious nationalists hoping for an overthrow of the Romans. I suspect it is unlikely you would come up with fishermen, and yet at least 4 of the 12 were just that. Perhaps it was more that they were Galileans who, according to the 1st century historian Josephus, "were ever fond of innovation and by nature disposed to change; they were ever ready to follow a leader and to begin an insurrection; they were quick in temper and given to quarreling but they were very chivalrous men". That certainly describes Peter to a tee! But there are other characteristics of fishermen, particularly in Galilee where sudden storms blow up. Fishermen have to work together as a team, each looking after the other in dangerous conditions; they have to be very observant to all the signs around them; and they have to be very persistent – even when things aren't going well. You'll remember that, early in his ministry, Jesus had been speaking to the crowds from a Simon Peter's boat, and afterwards Jesus asked Simon to steer to deep water and put down the net. Simon protested "We were hard at work all night and caught nothing, but if you say so, I will let down the net" at which they made a great haul. Simon's amazed reaction was "Go Lord, leave me, sinner that I am!" and it was apparently after this that all the 4 fishermen left everything and followed Jesus. You'll remember that also, after the crucifixion and resurrection when some of the disciples had decided to go back to fishing, they were in the boat all night, but again caught nothing. It was not until a figure on the shore that we are told they did not know was Jesus, told them to "shoot the net out on the starboard side" that they had a huge haul, at which point John says "It is the Lord", and Peter, impulsive as ever, plunges into the sea to be first with his Lord, and of course went on to be the leader of the Jerusalem church.

What do we learn from these fishermen who became Jesus' closest companions? We learn that we must be brave, we must work hard with other Christians in the mission that Jesus has entrusted to us, even in the roughest spiritual weather; we must be prepared to follow Christ's instructions, even when our own experience would suggest giving up; and dare I suggest – we must even be impetuous for Christ, knowing that sometimes we will make mistakes because, as it is said "the person who never made a mistake never made anything!" Finally, if we think about the continuation of that last gospel story, when Peter is asked by the risen Jesus three times if he loves him (to mirror Peter's three denials) we learn that, however bad a mistake we may have made (and denying that you had ever known Jesus must rank right up there with the very worst), Jesus is still ready to forgive us and, more than just forgiving us, is ready to entrust us – poor, weak sinners that we are – with the continuation of his mission on earth: In Jesus' words "feed my sheep". May God's Holy Spirit strengthen us to do just that.

It is shepherds and sheep that we will think about during tomorrow's compline.