

## Fourth Sunday before Lent (C)

*Isaiah 6.1-8*

*Luke 5.1-11*

‘When Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, ‘Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!’

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You might know the joke about the Christian who was stranded on a desert island. When he was rescued by a passing ship, the captain asked him why he had three huts on the beach. ‘The first is where I live’, he explained, ‘and the second is the church I go to.’ ‘But what about the third?’ the captain asked. ‘That’s the church I don’t go to,’ he said.

We might ask a similar question about why there were two boats on the Lake of Gennesaret (more commonly known as the Sea of Galilee). If you were editing this episode, you could probably remove the second boat without diminishing the narrative at all, though you’d probably upset a few Roman Catholics, who make rather a big deal about the fact that Jesus got into Peter’s boat and not the other one. Ancient theologians did in fact attribute ecclesial significance to the two boats. They believed they represented two branches of the church: east and west, Orthodox and catholic. In the early Church and in interpretations of Scripture, the church is indeed often compared to and symbolised as a boat (such as Noah’s Ark). It’s why this central section of church buildings is called the ‘nave’ – from the Latin ‘navis’, meaning ship (hence our words ‘navy’ and ‘navigation’).

To see these two boats as representing different branches of the church might seem a bit simplistic but it does offer a more optimistic perspective on what we usually call Christian division. Typically we regard the variety of Christian denominations as a sign of disagreement and conflict, and certainly from a historical point of view many denominations originate in theological and political disputes. But in Luke's telling of the miracle of the fish and the calling of the first disciples, the two boats are needed in order to accommodate so large a catch. Simon 'signaled their *partners* in the other boat to come and help them', when their nets were breaking. In other words, this is a story about collaboration between Christ's disciples when the catch is more than one boat can hold.

You might have noticed that someone seems to be missing from this story: Simon's brother Andrew features significantly in parallel episodes in the other Gospels but in Luke's version he is either absent or unnamed. In fact, he's mentioned only once in the whole of Luke's Gospel (in the list of the twelve apostles). That's a bit of a shame for us. This passage raises some important questions for Saint Andrew's Church in Cherry Hinton, nonetheless, and they concern our response to the growth of the church.

You have probably noticed that more and more people are finding their way to this church, whether that's coming on a Sunday or getting involved with activities here and elsewhere throughout the week. We should be profoundly grateful to God for providing such abundance, but it does come with challenges. Notice what happens after Jesus' miracle: the nets broke, Simon called for help, both boats began to sink and then Simon tells Jesus to go away. So I'd like to look at each of these and encourage you to think about how these consequences of, or responses to, God's blessing might resonate with our church at the moment.

The nets broke and the boats began to sink. Our translation is a little hesitant about the nets breaking (perhaps because that might imply that some of the fish got away). But the Greek text and other translations are clear: the nets break and the boats are sinking. Nevertheless they take an amazing catch and make it to shore. It's inevitable that as this church takes on more and more, the strain in some areas will be too much and some things – not just equipment but processes, activities and relationships – will be broken. In such a situation, it can be hard to distinguish between God's abundance and the load we have to bear – and one temptation is to get into the habit of thinking that the growth of the church is a burden rather than a blessing. To perceive God's blessing, we have to thank God continually for what He gives us, and in doing so we will find that apparent failures and

difficulties become opportunities and signs of mercy.

‘They signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them’. It might seem obvious but in our culture we’re not very practiced at asking for help, and unfortunately I suspect we’re becoming less inclined to offer help as well. Many of our greatest responsibilities – like caring for our families or sustaining communities – are increasingly done alone, and this is causing crises in mental and physical health, in our provision of care for the young and the vulnerable, and the deterioration of our social and political lives. The church is not immune: more and more work is being done by fewer and fewer people. So first of all, thank you for what each of you does offer to this church. But more than that, we need this church to become a place where help is requested and given without a thought;

where no-one need feel guilty or like a burden for asking for support, because there is another boat alongside them which is ready to heed their signal.

Finally, Simon tells Jesus to go away. This is a direct response to the abundance of God’s blessing. It’s not that Simon wants Jesus to go away because he caused the nets to break and the boats to sink; it’s that when God’s mercy overflows with such abundance into Simon’s life, he cannot face his own sin; when confronted with such love, he cannot believe that he is worthy to receive it – therefore he rejects it.

Think about the times in your life when someone has given you something so valuable, so beyond anything you deserve that you were tempted to reject or ignore that gift. Perhaps someone nursed you when you were

seriously unwell or paid a debt for you or gave something up so that you could benefit or taught you something entirely selflessly. Deep down we are often frightened by these situations because to accept them with an open heart would mean recognising that someone loved us without condition. There is no kind of love so frightening as unconditional love.

That's why Jesus says to Simon, 'Do not be afraid'. This salutation, spoken by the angel to Zechariah, father of John the Baptist, and to Mary, mother of God, is offered not only because that heavenly apparition frightens our senses but because something amazing is about to happen – a great transformation, a lavish gift from above – which signifies God's limitless love for each of us.

I'm not quite sure how this applies at the level of the church as a whole – whether as a body we can push God away because we are frightened of his love – possibly. But it's hugely important for us as members of the body of Christ, because in order to receive others with the love of God we must be able to receive the love of God ourselves. I have no doubt that there are many people here who have so much to give to the life of this church – and even more so as the catch increases – but are held back because of their sense of unworthiness.

Jesus has a job for every one of us, which is more important than what we think about ourselves and whether we are able or worthy. So I encourage you all as you sit here in this boat, and feel the fish straining in the nets, not to be dismayed by failure, to ask for help when you need it, to offer help willingly, and to hear the Lord saying to you: 'Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.' If, with God's help, we can do those things, then we will truly merit the name 'disciple'.