

**St. Luke, Ch. 4, vv 38-41, and Ch. 5, vv. 1-11**

Ch. 5, vv. 10-11: Then Jesus said to Simon, “Don’t be afraid, from now on you will catch men.” So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.

**Galatians, Ch. 5, vv. 13-26**

Ch. 5, v. 22: But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.

The Lake of Gennesaret, or Sea of Galilee as it is more commonly known, is that harp-shaped area of water near the top of our familiar maps of the Holy Land, so towards the northern end of the valley of the River Jordan. It looks small on the map, partly because we see it in contrast to the much bigger Dead Sea down south, but partly too because when we look at maps of foreign countries we don’t know, we always misjudge the scale. In fact it is far bigger than any lake in Germany except Lake Constance (if you are wondering where on earth that is, it’s the English name for the *Bodensee*); three times as big as Lake Starnberg and six times the size of Lake Steinhude. In the Gospels we find frequent associations between this large lake, or inland sea, and the ministry and miracles of Jesus: Jesus recruiting his first Apostles from among the fishermen; Jesus using a boat as a pulpit from which to preach to the crowds on the shore; Jesus walking across the water to his disciples’ boat, and saving the sinking Peter [Mt. 14, 24-32]; Jesus in the boat asleep amidst the storm, and waking to show his mastery over it [Lk. 8, 22-25]. In connection with this last scene in particular I have often read that it is a realistic portrayal of conditions on the lake, where violent storms can arise suddenly and dangerously. But what is not mentioned in the geography books, but we know from the Gospels, is that it is a place where such storms arise not only on the water, but in people’s lives as well.

All right; in that it is just like every other place, both then and now. I have never been to the Holy Land. Sometimes I envy those who have, thinking what a very special experience it must be to visit these scenes and walk in the footsteps of Jesus. But at other times I wonder how many of today’s pilgrims are able to avoid disappointment when their search for spiritual food collides with present-day reality. On Wikipedia I came across a picture of the tourist hotels that now

line the shore of the Sea of Galilee at Tiberias, and quickly clicked it away, feeling I would rather keep my mind's eye focused on images I can draw from the Gospels. You might say that this is understandable; or you might say it is another example of religion taking refuge in a romanticised past and hiding itself from the realities and the needs of the world of today. Jesus, when he walked the shores of the Sea of Galilee, did not (as far as we know!) romanticise about how much better the place must have looked in the time of King David. No: he went and talked to the fishermen in the boats on the beach, and got involved in their lives, very much in the present.

The Gospel reading set for today is from Chapter 5 of St Luke's Gospel; in the New International Version the passage is headed "The calling of the first disciples". But my attention was drawn to the relationship between this story and the narrative preceding it in Chapter 4, a narrative which sets it apart from the accounts in all the other Gospels. Matthew's and Mark's accounts are almost identical with each other: Jesus comes across Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John going about their business as fishermen and calls them to follow him, without apparently having known them, or they him, beforehand; and it is the calling of the fishermen to be the first disciples that effectively marks the beginning of Jesus' ministry. But Luke sees things differently. According to him, Jesus not only knew Simon Peter beforehand; he apparently knew him quite well, was a guest in his house, and so was on hand to cure his mother-in-law's fever. This immediately got about, and many people brought their sick to be cured by him. But the reaction was not one that Jesus wanted: as Luke reports, "Demons came out of many people, shouting 'You are the Son of God!' But he rebuked them and would not allow them to speak."

At first I misread this passage, and thought it was people, rather than demons, who shouted "You are the Son of God". And from a present-day point of view I suppose I can say that that probably was the case, since I doubt whether many of us can form a satisfactory picture in our minds of a demon leaving a person and shouting out as it does so. Hieronymus Bosch or his 15<sup>th</sup> century

contemporaries might have painted such scenes, but in the present day and age the only way it is possible for most of us to visualise this scene will be in terms of a person in a distressed mental state calling out in such a way that it seems to the people round about that it is not the sick person who is crying out, but some other power possessing him or her. But there is no indication at this point that the other people present acknowledge Jesus in this way, or that anybody makes any personal commitment to him. It is not clear to me whether Simon Peter, his mother-in-law, and the others who brought sick people to be cured experienced Jesus' actions as being miraculous; or whether, in the context of the limited medical knowledge and practice of the time, they perhaps merely saw him as a skilful (though as such, a very welcome) healer.

Whichever way it was, we are faced, as at several points in the Gospels, with Jesus' reluctance to be publicly acclaimed as the Messiah, or as the Son of God. This is often puzzling, but reading this story I suddenly felt I understood why it might have been. Firstly, perhaps, because the occasion was not sufficient to justify such a reaction, leaving the feeling that the acclamation is too light-weight, is "built on sand", as Jesus himself might have said. A telling example of Jesus' reaction to such an acclamation is to be found in St. John's rather different account of the calling of the first disciples, which involves not only Simon Peter and Andrew, but also Philip and Nathanael. John tells us:

"When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, 'Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false.' 'How do you know me?' Nathanael asked. Jesus answered, 'I saw you while you were still under the fig-tree, before Philip called you.' Then Nathanael declared, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel.' Jesus said, 'You believe, because I told you I saw you under the fig-tree? You shall see greater things than that.'" [Jn. 1, 47-50]

And so he did!

But on the other hand, I also feel that such an acclamation is not enough for Jesus, unless the insight also leads to a personal commitment or a change in life or behaviour. He does not want acclamation: "Lord, Lord!" Jesus said: "Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" [Mt. 7, 21]. And this

personal commitment and response does not come at the healing of Simon Peter's mother-in-law; but a few days later, when Jesus comes down to the lake where Simon and his companions are working, and gets into the boat.

Simon is a fisherman. In a fishing boat he is the expert, he is the professional, he knows what's what. He knows everything about fishing this patch of water: he knows where, when and how fish are to be caught; and he also knows that there are nights when one simply does not catch a thing. So when he agrees to do what Jesus asks, the scepticism in his voice is unmistakable. Nevertheless, he agrees. He allows Jesus to take control in an area which until then had been entirely his own province. And when Jesus takes control, Simon learns that even when a situation appears to be hopeless, with Jesus there is an amazing amount – one could say a marvellous or miraculous amount – to be got out of it. And in this way, not only fish are caught, but Simon – and James and John – as well.

When I was at school we had a Religious Knowledge book whose author seemed to think that faith could be made more palatable to young people if the miraculous bits were as far as possible explained away. I remember that with regard to this story he insisted that there was no suggestion that Jesus suddenly created the fish: "If there is anything miraculous about it, it is Jesus' knowledge of where the fish were to be caught." In saying this, the writer seems to have missed the point, because the true miracle is not what Jesus does to the fish, but what he does to Simon Peter. The impact on him of Jesus' intervention in his very own area of expertise is overwhelming, much more so than that of the healing of his mother-in-law; and I don't imagine that afterwards, when Peter took stock of what had happened to him, he spent much time considering whether it was miraculous or not – the important thing was the outcome. The event is uncanny, terrifying. Peter is swept away by what is happening to him. "Go away from me, Lord: I am a sinful man!" is his first reaction. But a word of encouragement from Jesus, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will catch men", quite literally turns him round: "They pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him." It is his moment of decision, his moment of choice between

fear and trust. In the course of his life, as he comes to understand better what has happened to him, “Go away from me, Lord: I am a sinful man!” will turn into “Stay with me, Lord, sinful as I am!” Sin is not an obstacle to salvation through Jesus; rather, the acknowledgement of sin plays an essential part in gaining it.

What charisma must have radiated from Jesus! What an aura he must have had! One that immediately cast its spell over the people who came into contact with him: and in particular those whom he approached directly, spoke to directly, “getting into the same boat with them”, so to speak, as he did with Simon Peter, entering into their spheres of activity, their innermost worlds, and inviting them to enter into his. And this mutual taking of possession is such that it lasts a lifetime: it is often pointed out that there is nothing, not even originating from enemies of the early Christian movement, to indicate that any of the Apostles apart from Judas Iscariot fell away from their faith. They may have had their times of weakness, like Peter himself, or of doubt, like Thomas; but the Jesus who had taken hold of them never let them go; the Jesus they had taken hold of they never let go of. The fishermen were caught.

But just a moment. Isn't there something about this charisma, and about the Apostles' surrender to it, that is more than a bit disturbing? “From now on you will catch men”: is that a sentence we can read without feeling uncomfortable? And this formulation in St. Luke's Gospel somehow has an even more brutal echo than that used by Matthew and Mark: “I will make you fishers of men”, they write, and one has a bit of the image of the angler seeking, and with luck finding, the one fish with which he enters into a contest of skill before he can proudly display his trophy. “You will catch men” sounds much more brutal; the corresponding image from the world of fishing might be that of a deep-sea trawler bringing up everything that is on the sea bed, an industrial fishing boat enclosing whole shoals, and leaving behind a barren and empty environment. In Germany especially, talk of catching men evokes the image of the “Rattenfänger”, the Rat Catcher, taken from the story of the Pied Piper of Hamelin, the seducer of naïve youth, and is applied to the demagogue, the dangerously charismatic

purveyor of evil and inhuman ideologies. Perhaps for centuries already, but at the latest since Hitler, it has scarcely been possible to read that statement “You will catch men”, without something of a shiver running down our backs.

For what I am going to say now, I cannot take credit myself. About a month ago, just when I was beginning to get to grips with what I wanted to say about this morning’s Gospel, I happened to hear Dr Sam Wells, the Vicar of St Martins-in-the-Fields in London, doing the “Thought for the Day” spot in the BBC’s morning current affairs programme. He took as his starting point the stories currently being reported in the media, and causing much concern, of young British Moslems being radicalised by extremist imams and travelling to fight in Syria or Iraq or Afghanistan. Dr Wells considered the ability of charismatic speakers to instil into people what they consider to be ideals, the sense of committing oneself to a cause that is greater than oneself, to something that is worth dying for. And he considered the intoxicating effect on the speaker of knowing that he has the power to sway people in that way.

By contrast to this, Dr Wells said, St Paul gives us good advice on “how to test your words before you speak them”; and he referred to the passage from the Letter to the Galatians that was our first reading this morning. “Paul suggested nine qualifications before you commit your words to speech: ‘love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control’.” These things are the Fruits of the Spirit, Paul says; these are the characteristics that mark out those who “belong to Christ Jesus”. The “acts of sinful nature” that Paul lists first – hatred, discord, jealousy, selfish ambition etc. – are ways in which we both harm ourselves, and seek to harm others: they are against the moral law; and even though we Christians, as Paul says, “are called to be free”, why should we want to use our freedom to pursue these? On the contrary, we are freed from them, free to harvest the Fruits of the Spirit, love, joy, peace etc., with which we seek to do good to other people. “Against such things there is no law,” Paul says helpfully, so nothing to stop us being patient, kind, faithful or gentle. These are forms of behaviour by which we may bring others to Jesus, if

they see that they are fruits of our faith, and know that we “belong to Christ Jesus” and “live by the Spirit”.

There is no doubt that Simon Peter, James and John also felt that the Good News of Jesus was a cause greater than themselves, something worth dying for. But it is clear too is that when they left everything to follow Jesus, he did not send them out to fight in a foreign country, or to impose on other people what they considered to be the truth. He sent them to proclaim a Gospel of love and peace, to practice the fruits of the spirit, and to set people free. We do not seek to force God upon the people around us, but by our actions and example to draw other people to him. This is the way in which we are called to be fishers of men. When my wife and I were discussing the Gospel story we wondered whether “leaving everything and following him”, as Peter did, was really an ideal to be emulated. Time is too short for me to go into that properly now; perhaps just the suggestion that for many – or most – people, “leaving everything” to follow him may not literally mean leaving one’s home, family and existing responsibilities; but it may well mean leaving behind one’s old priorities and changing one’s style of life, in order to “follow him” in the Spirit.

In my Bible commentary there is a note on the phrase “catch men”: it says “literally, ‘catch them alive’”. A friend of ours who taught Greek confirms that the Greek word translated as “catch” does indeed actually mean “catch alive”. This may seem curious, since fishermen fishing with nets like Peter, James and John catch fish alive in any case. But the fish they catch will, of course, very soon be dead and eaten. The wording used here can only be intended to indicate a difference: that the men Peter is to catch are not doomed to death. On the contrary, they are to be caught for life. Jesus said: “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full” [Jn. 10, 10]. This is to be the experience of those who are caught by, or for, Jesus: not killing and destruction, but “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” Life to the full is what God wants to give us; such is the Gospel, the Good News, of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.