

24 January 2021

Jonah 3:1-5, 10  
1 Corinthians 7:29-31  
Mark 1:14-20

*As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. 'Come, follow me,' Jesus said, 'and I will send you out to fish for people.' At once they left their nets and followed him. (Mark 1:16-18)*

As Jesus looked for an engaging way to recruit Simon Peter and Andrew to his cause, it was natural that he would use the metaphor of their current work: previously their work was with fish; now they would work with people. I think it unlikely that Jesus intended some deep symbolic meaning in his choice of the fishing metaphor. However, I want to employ and explore some of the metaphoric possibilities today because I feel they provide some helpful hooks (if you'll pardon the expression!) for the things I feel prompted to say to you today.

To begin with, we do well to think of ourselves as the fish, the objects of the fishing activity of Jesus and his followers. What does it mean to be fished up?<sup>1</sup>

In the Bible the sea is presented as the place of primordial chaos. The Jewish people were not a seafaring people (apart from the obvious fishermen); for them the sea and lakes represented places of danger and were generally to be feared.<sup>2</sup> They would think of Jonah. Instead of doing what God told him, he went sailing off in the opposite direction; a great storm arose, which was only calmed when, at his prompting, the sailors threw him overboard. They would think of the Israelites, coming out of Egypt when God made a way through the sea; a sea which then demonstrated its fearsome power as it swallowed up their Egyptian pursuers. They would think even further back, to stories of creation, when God's order, God's new world, emerged from the dark primal sea. The sea came to symbolise, for them, the dark power of evil, threatening to destroy God's good creation, God's people, God's

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<sup>1</sup> The three uses of the metaphor that follow are suggested by Vena.

<sup>2</sup> The following from Wright, *Mark*, pp. 52-53, with minor adaptation.

purposes.

So to be fished up out of the depths means to be rescued from the forces of death.

Some of you may have a profound sense of God's rescue of you; your experience of becoming a Christ-follower might be quite new and the contrast with your former life still very vivid. For most of us, I expect, the experience is long ago, or we may not really have known a time when we would have regarded ourselves as not being followers of Christ; and thus the sense of rescue is vague at best. I, who have been a Christian since infancy, cannot relate a tale of profound transformation from former ways of sinfulness. Nevertheless, I still can recognise that I have been rescued from those dark forces of death and chaos. I catch glimpses of what might have been when I am tempted towards, or even sometimes dabble briefly in, things, attitudes, and actions that would corrupt me, trap and imprison me, divert me from following my true north in Christ. When I face these struggles, they make me think of what might have been – and I am thankful that I have been rescued from them.

In the Bible the metaphor of fishing is sometimes used as a symbol of judgement: divine judgement of the nations, and of the rich and powerful, the privileged, those who get ahead by pushing others down.<sup>3</sup> The idea of judgement may give us comfort, or it may challenge us: perhaps it should do both. If we look at the world around us with its many examples of abuse of power, greed, violence and oppression, we may recognise our longing for someone to be at work in sorting it out and putting it to rights. We “fish” need some kind of fishing activity going on near us to remove from our environment these forces of darkness, so that the world will cease to be the hostile place it is; so that God's reign of justice and peace will be established on earth as it is already in heaven. That's the comfort bit.

The challenge bit is that we must recognise our own complicity with these forces of evil. Many of us benefit from the systems and approaches the world employs. Many of us enjoy cheap goods and services with little thought to the exploitation of labour in many industries. We enjoy food and other things produced at great cost to the planet we inhabit; and deep down we may have sense that our present lifestyles are

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<sup>3</sup> See Jeremiah 16:16, Amos 4:2, and Ezekiel 29:4

robbing the generations to follow us. One of the issues reportedly hampering solutions to the present housing crisis is that any government knows that too many voters have their sense of wellbeing tied up in rising house values. And so we could go on.

So somehow, through the work of the Holy Spirit, through reflection and prayer, through good influences, through action both personal and corporate, we need these forces of evil fished out of our lives too.

For a fish, being fished up means death. It is not a pleasant thought: we think, "Surely Jesus can't have been thinking about this!"

Nevertheless, I think it too is a helpful metaphor. You see, the thing is, to be a follower of Jesus involves dying to everything else that might have a claim on our lives.

Tomorrow is the Feast of the Conversion of St Paul. It is the moment when he was, as it were, fished up out of the sea of a life set in bitter opposition to Jesus and all he stood for. But to follow in the new way meant a great deal of death for him. I'm not talking only about Paul's eventual martyrdom, but generally about the loss of an old way of life that had meant a great deal to him.

Paul was to describe the change in this way in Philippians 3:

If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless. But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him.... I want to know Christ – yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead. (Philippians 3:4-9a, 10-11)

Here we hear Paul celebrating his new life, placing immeasurable value on it in contrast to the old; but we also hear that he had to give up his old life in order to grasp the new. Being fished up meant dying to himself.

Simon, Andrew, James and John left behind their family fishing businesses. In all likelihood these businesses had been passed from generation to generation. There was security in this work; the business was immersed deeply in the kinship ties so important in that culture; they knew what they were doing in it. But then along comes Jesus, and he invites them to leave all this behind – to leave boats and nets, leave income, leave security and confidence, leave family and heritage – leave all this behind and embark on a voyage to a totally unknown future.

Just what each of us may have to leave behind to follow Jesus will depend on who we are, and what God is asking of us at that time. For Christine and me it was to lead nine years ago to our dropping two-thirds of our income, leaving behind careers in professions that we understood well and in which we were successful and well-regarded, uprooting ourselves from home and children and friends and the community we had been part of for 25 years, and launching off into the unknown of parish leadership in a city we barely knew.

For others, the call of God at different times may demand more or demand less. That's not the point. The point is that we have to be open to *every* aspect of life being available to the call of God: being fished up involves dying to the old way of pleasing ourselves.

We see something of a reflection of this in 1 Corinthians 7. The particular details Paul presents were specific to the time, situation, and people he was addressing. The timeless point however is that all aspects of life have to be reprioritised in the light of the presence of the reign of God among us. All areas of life have to be subsumed under the greater good of unencumbered devotion to God. The present way of the world is not the ultimate reality; it does not yet fully reflect the good intention of God. The priorities we hold, the decisions we make, the way we live, are to anticipate the way of the world as it will one day be – the way it will be when Christ's reign is all in all.

It seems to me that many people want the kingdom of God to come near; but fewer are prepared to pay the price and do the costly work of repentance and reorientation towards God.

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Having thought about what it might mean to be fish in a metaphorical sense, let us look again at the call Jesus made to Simon and Andrew, James and John. These people were called to become fishers of people, and we too are called to follow that path.

We here are “Simon Peter people”, fished up, not just for ourselves, but so that we can in turn fish other people up. I’ll say that again: We are fished up, not just for ourselves, but so that we can in turn fish other people up.

Look behind you.

Do you notice something different about St Peter’s today?

There is no fishing net hanging from the gallery; there are no fish caught there.

I have moved the fishing net out of sight as a visual metaphor for us today.

Imagine what our Church community would be like if we had neglected or forgotten how to fish. Imagine what our Church community would become if there ceased to be fish being added to our number year by year.

We are to be engaged with Jesus in the work of rescuing others from chaos and evil, from the forces of darkness and death. If our motivation for this has become dim, then perhaps we need to remember that we ourselves have been rescued and to reflect on what that feels like and what it means for us. Our calling to do this fishing work emanates out of the mercy and love of God, the God who has rescued each of us, the God who loves the world so much that he would send the reluctant and complaining prophet Jonah to a foreign people, a people known for their bloodthirsty and warlike ways, to urge them to repentance.

We are to be engaged with Jesus in the work of transforming the world. Jesus’ call to follow him is not that we take people out of a hostile world, promising them a better life in God’s heavenly kingdom. Instead, his purpose is to change the world in

such a way that it will cease to be the hostile place it is.<sup>4</sup> In doing this we anticipate and join in with the coming of God's kingdom among us.

And as we do our fishing work we must recognise that we are calling people to something that is a dying to an old way of life. We should not try to trick people into believing that becoming a Christian is a bed of roses. It is no bed of roses; but it is a life worth dying for!

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Jesus announced "The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"

The particular word Jesus used for "time" here is *kairos*. This particular word has the sense of opportune time, of a decisive moment; and it is often used to denote a time of God's particular favour or God's activity or the fulfilment of God's plans. Paul uses the same word in 1 Corinthians 7 when he talks of the time being short.

There is in all of this a sense of urgency, a sense of ripeness and rightness, a sense that something that is right for a particular time or season may not be right for a different season.

And so all this challenges us to reflection in the days and months ahead: What is God calling us St Peter's people into at *this* time? Where and how might we best go fishing?

I conclude with a collect for the Feast of the Conversion of St Paul:

*Convert us,  
Jesus the persecuted,  
as you converted Paul  
and sent him as apostle to the world.  
May our love, our prayers, our suffering  
carry your gospel at whatever cost  
to all who wait to hear it. Amen.*<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Vena.

<sup>5</sup> *A New Zealand Prayer Book/He Karakia Mihinare o Aotearoa*, p.644.

**Sources:**

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