

Fishing is easy - for Jesus!

Mark 1:14-20

Tony, Oran and I had a memorable Christmas with our family. We all went camp together on a family friends farm in Waiouru.

We did lots of different activities. Tramping, navigation, rifle shooting, searching for fossils, flying kites, feeding koura, and observing wild kaimanawa horses. The children especially learnt a lot.

Tony and I were particularly impressed with Oran. The whole time away he didn't get upset about anything, that was, until, on the last day, we tried our hand at fishing.

Tony took us to the Waimarino Dam where we used to fish for trout as kids. My Dad paired Oran up with his uncle Simon, and together they walked down to the shore, rod in hand. Oran was so excited. *He was going to catch* a fish.

The only experience of fishing Oran has had so far is purely virtual. While playing a game on the xbox, if he pushes one button this way and another that, the game will put a fish on his virtual line, and success, he had *caught* a fish! Well done. Seeing how keen he was holding a *real* rod, I knew what was likely going to occur.

So, they cast out the line. "That was a good cast" boomed my brother as he gave Oran the rod to hold. "Now wind it in" he instructed. "Not too slowly." Oran turned the reel. Winding, winding, winding, keeping a keen eye on the water line. Winding, winding, winding. He would catch a fish any moment now. Winding, winding, winding - Clunk! The hook hit the rod. "No fish!" Oran exclaimed. "There's no fish on there!" he said, pointing to the hook. Feeling let down, he left the rod and walked away. "I didn't catch a fish" he said as he plonked down on my lap. "Hmmm, you just have to keep trying" I told him. "No mum" he said, sniffing "there's no fish in there. It's too hard." So, as I said, the kids learnt a lot. Oran especially. He learnt about how it is not that easy to catch a fish, in real life.

We can probably sympathize with Oran a little. For first-time fishermen and women, fishing seems more difficult than it ought to be. We daydream of catching a big fish (despite our inexperience) but soon realise fishing takes lot of persistence, and patience, skill, and standing around. Like Oran, some of us too may find it "too hard" and others I suspect "too boring".

There is one fisherman I know for whom fishing is easy. When he passes by the water he throws out his line and immediately hooks a fish – its Jesus.

We have an example of this today as we hear again that familiar account from Mark's Gospel of Jesus calling his disciples, Simon and Andrew, James and John.

They were experienced fishermen, but on this particular day, they threw out their nets only to be caught themselves by the lure of a man who saw them and called out from the shore “Follow me” and they immediately dropped what they were doing and followed.

How many of us have squirmed a little in spirit when we hear this story, and worry about whether *we* have what it takes to be a disciple. Could you do it? If a clear call came to you tomorrow morning, could you get up from your chair and walk out the door. To simply give your life over to a new way of being forsaking all else.

That is more or less what they did, those first four disciples. Someone that they had never seen before in their lives said, “Follow me,” and they did, leaving their families, their jobs, their homes behind in order to go with him. They made a pretty courageous choice that day. A choice that has hailed them heroes of our faith. What strength, what courage, what sacrifice, what faith!

The choices we make in life *are* important aren't they. About what we believe, how we will act, who we will love, what we will do for a living, what we will do with retirement – they are *all* important, and we shouldn't take them lightly, shouldn't dismiss them as nothing. Belonging to God is not a matter of going limp in Gods arms, after all. We are called to love, to serve, to heal, to forgive, and these involve *daily* choices.

But sometimes, I think we make *too* much of human choice along our Christian journey. When we agonize over them and slip into a way of thinking that tells us that by our good decisions and good deeds, we will succeed at this thing. We fall into that ancient trap of works-righteousness – that comfortable delusion that we can, if we will just work hard enough, pray enough, help enough and give enough, then we will be worthy. Christ will recognise us as his own true disciples because of all the good things we have accomplished.

Works-righteousness - I come across it all the time in pastoral ministry with the aged and the dying. Just two days ago I was talking with an 89-year-old woman who after a lengthy story about how she so understood liturgy, the doctrines, the catechism, and how although she hadn't attended Mass in years, that she had lived a good life and never been into any trouble. She gave me an account of all her good choices, then paused, look at me and from some deeper most honest place, said: “but will I qualify.” In other words, have I made enough good choices and won God's good grace?

Sometimes I think if we make too much of human choice, that what we lose along the way is a full sense of the power of God – to recruit people who have made terrible choices, to invade the most hopeless of lives and fill them with light. We lose the sense of the power of God to calm rough seas, to part waters, to drive out demons, to cure the sick.

We may be tempted to cower a little in spirit in the face of the strength, and courage, sacrifice, and faith of those first four disciples, when they made that huge commitment to follow Jesus. But perhaps there was nothing hard about it at all. Perhaps they simply took one look at him and that was that. Perhaps it was not that they decided something that day at all, but that something happened to them, something beyond their control. Perhaps they were not so much called by Jesus – but claimed.

Claimed by Jesus. I like that. Theologian Karl Barth notes in his work on this account that these fishermen are elected to discipleship simply through the fact that Jesus claims them. On that note, we might allow ourselves to consider that this may not so much be a hero story than a miracle story - full of God's power, power as of the feeding of the five thousand or raising the dead.

This is not story about the power of human beings to change their lives, to leave everything behind and follow. This is a story about the authority of Christ and the power of God – to summon the human spirit to service, to inject faith where there is none, to make disciples where there where none a moment before.

When Jesus declares that now they shall be fishers of people, their new identity is anchored in the fact that Jesus fished for them. Jesus is the ultimate fisherman, and they are the hooked fish.

This is a story not about us. This is a story about God, about God's ability not only to call us but to *claim* us as people who are able to follow – able to follow because we somehow can't take our eyes off him, because he knows what we hunger for and because he seems to be food.

If Simon and Andrew, James and John made any choice that day, it was simply that they allowed themselves to fall in love. They took one look at Jesus, and the rest is history – and with this connection time had been fulfilled and the Kingdom of God came near - and comes near – every time *we* meet with Jesus and allow ourselves to love and to follow.

Following for some may mean learning how to fish, for others it may mean staying home and preparing lunch for hungry fishermen and women when they return, or minding their children. It may mean caring for Zebedee when he gets too old to fish. It may mean casting out the old nets in a new way, or at a new spot, or for new reasons. It may mean making sure everyone receives a decent wage for their work. It may mean advocating for the fish, making sure the waters are not over-fished. It may mean doing less in the day, not more, so that there is more time to watch the happy whale blow, happy because it knows it is too big for your net.

The possibilities for following are endless. Sometimes they will be big, sometimes they will be too small to mention. But we can count on the authority and power of Jesus to *create us* to be people who *can* follow. And with that support, anything is possible.

Amen.