

Address – 10 February 2019 – Highampton

When Jesus was being tempted in the wilderness, one of the things he was being encouraged to do was to use his miraculous powers just for show – for his own self-glorification. But Jesus never did that.

Our gospel reading today is a good example of how Jesus takes ordinary situations, and makes them extra-ordinary. Of seeing a need, and in his compassion, responding to it. Having used Simon Peter's boat as a floating pulpit, he was aware that the fisherman had been working all night but had caught nothing. And he recognised that would have been a real problem for the fishermen and their families. No fish – no food on the table. Jesus sees an opportunity to demonstrate God's power – not just for the sake of it, but to meet a genuine human need, and in the process, transforms the lives of those who witnessed it.

We might think there is also something of the theatrical here – like an escapologist making things extra difficult, not only escaping from a straight-jacket, but doing it hanging upside-down from a crane, or submerged in a tank of water. The fishermen on Galilee fished at night for good reason – that is when the fish were active and feeding. In the heat of the day they would go down into the deeper, cooler water, and fishing then would be a complete waste of time. The fisherman must have thought Jesus was a bit crazy – he was just a carpenter – so what did he know about the practicalities of fishing.

It's a bit like in my professional career – when I was a civil engineer with highways department, I often had to go to public meetings to explain to the local community why we were having to replace a bridge, and why the road would need to be closed for 12 weeks to do the work. And there would always someone in the audience who knew better – if he was in charge, he would get the work done in two weeks, and at a fraction of the cost. And you have to try to respond politely, without sounding too dismissive.

The fishermen must have felt the same. And perhaps they went along with Jesus' suggestion just to humour him, or to prove him wrong. Or perhaps there was just something so persuasive in the way that Jesus spoke and acted, that they actually believed that something might happen. Either way, they did what Jesus asked, and the results were spectacular. As with the feeding of the five thousand, or the turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana, they didn't just catch a few fish – they had this enormous catch, so much that they needed to call their friends over to help, and even then, it almost made the boats sink.

When God acts, there are no half-measures. His provision is never just enough – it is extravagant, overflowing, abundant. And that’s the way Jesus works – he sees a practical, human need. In his compassion, he responds to it. And along the way, he demonstrates God’s awesome power – and changes the lives of those caught up in it.

There is something going on here that is really reassuring for us. Jesus takes what is there, and uses it. The fishermen would have said that they only had limited skills – they were just fishermen. To perform this miracle, and demonstrate God’s power, Jesus doesn’t go and catch the fish himself. He doesn’t make the fish magically swim to the shore and jump in the fishermen’s baskets. No, Jesus tells the fishermen what to do, and it is their work – in this case, back-breaking work – that makes the miracle happen. And in the process, Jesus transforms their lives, turning them from simple fishermen, to fishers of men. He takes them from where they were, uses what they had, and gives them a whole new outlook.

I used to get really frustrated, because I felt that the skills that I had developed over many years as an engineer were of no use in my ‘other life’ as a Christian. I really wanted to use the limited gifts that I had for God’s purposes, but it took many years, and the guidance of some really good friends, for me to actually discern what God wanted me to do. And perhaps it also needed me to react a bit like Peter did – to recognise that I couldn’t do it in my own strength, but that I needed to depend utterly on God’s grace. A bit less of me, and a bit more of God.

The same is true for all of us. Jesus has a job for each of us to do in the unfolding of his kingdom. We just need to be aware of what is going on around us, and listen out for his call. As Jesus’ mother said to the servants at the wedding at Cana – listen to him, and do what he tells you. And when we do, like the fishermen on Galilee, amazing things can happen.

Both of our readings today conclude with someone being sent, or being called to follow. Isaiah responds to God’s call – “Here I am – send me”. Similarly, when faced with the miracle they had witnessed, and the persuasive personality of Jesus, the fishermen leave their nets to follow Jesus. When we look at the church today, we may sometimes feel like those fishermen – like we’ve been working hard all night, and have very little to show for it. But Jesus tells us, as he told Peter, not to be afraid. We must listen for his voice, and do what he tells us.

Let us pray:

Christ has no body but yours,

No hands, no feet on earth but yours,

*Yours are the eyes with which he looks in
compassion on this world,*

Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,

Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.

Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,

Yours are the eyes, you are his body.

Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

(Teresa of Avila)

Amen.