

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

There is something inherently risky about the life of a fisherman or woman. The sea is so vast, and the boats are so small. Before a fisherman sets out to sea, they must weigh the risks before they weigh anchor. They ask themselves these questions: "will the weather hold? Is there a storm coming? Where are the shoals of the fish to be found? How many crew will they need? Is the boat shipshape or in need of repair?"

The sea is their place of work - it is where they make their living. The fishermen cast their nets overboard and hope to catch enough fish to feed themselves, their families and to sell to the people of the village.

The setting for our gospel passage this morning is the Sea of Galilee, which is not really a sea, but a lake. It goes under two names: the Sea of Galilee, or Lake Tiberias. Tiberias is the main town, but around the shores of the lake are some familiar sounding villages: Capernaum, Magdala, Bethsaida. And it happened that one day that the Son of God was walking by the side of the lake and saw two brothers, Simon and Andrew, casting a net into the sea. The Son of God, whose name was Jesus, called out to the two men: "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men."

So begins the "gathering in" of the men who would follow Jesus for the rest of his life. Jesus is building a community for the future transmission of the gospel. But for now, he chooses four working men to become the first recruits of this new endeavor. We hear that they left their nets and followed him. How simple and straightforward it all sounds! It's easy to make the assumption that Jesus expected them never to fish again, but we learn that, following the crucifixion, the men returned to fishing in the sea of Galilee. Then the risen Jesus comes to them once more, and calls them, and even cooks them breakfast. At this second encounter, Jesus also reminds them of their sacred mission.

Between these two encounters, both on the shore of the sea of Galilee, much had happened. The lives of the fishermen had been changed irrevocably. Deep within them a change had occurred: a fundamental movement of the heart towards God and to the mission of the kingdom of heaven. They had, in a sense, experienced another ocean, as vast as any ocean, which is the ocean of God's love. They had been used to being the ones who caught the fish, only this time it was they who had been caught: caught in the net of love by Jesus the fisherman.

All this they understood, being men of the sea. Jesus had gathered them and opened their eyes to the mysteries of God's kingdom. They understood what Jesus had done and loved him for it. They loved that he had confidence in them, even if they had little in themselves. Initially, Jesus had gone to meet them where they were. Jesus took a risk by asking them, because they could have said no; could have said that they were too busy, or they could have ignored him altogether.

Why did Jesus choose *them*? Why didn't he find a learned scribe or Pharisee to be his disciple? The answer is, that he did, only much later, when he reached out to Saul the Pharisee, who became one of his greatest apostles. But first, Jesus chose the men of the sea. We can imagine them, with their faces burnished brown under the hot Middle Eastern sun, their hands rough with hauling in the nets and raising the sail to catch the breeze. Jesus chose men who knew their dependence on what the sea could provide for them, who knew that God was the provider, and that he often provided in abundance.

The fishermen chosen by Jesus knew that life was about taking risks, knew that life could be short and brutish but also knew that by the grace of God, life can be blessed and fruitful. Jesus chose men who were masters of their boats, but who also knew that the sea was the true master. Into the hands of these men would Jesus entrust the mission of the kingdom of heaven.

"God has come near! Repent, and believe in the good news!" Jesus told them. They must have been ready to hear this message. God had prepared the ground, the rich soil of their hearts, to receive this message, so that when they heard the words they left their nets and followed Jesus. I'm sure if we met them today we would be surprised to see how ordinary they were - rough hewn maybe, but essentially people of good heart. We would be surprised at their plain speech, not always convincing, not always eloquent. But then we would notice something different: we would notice that when they spoke of Jesus, their faces would change and we would see the light of Christ burning brightly within them. We would hear the tenderness in their voices - made more striking by seeing the strong and muscular men before us - speaking about the kingdom of heaven, talking in parables as their master did, borrowing examples from the sea, the land and the lives of ordinary folk.

You see, the gospel of Christ is not some grand scheme which requires you to have a college degree or a university education. Of course, you can do it that way, and many have. If Christian life is *Truth*, then it will submit to any kind of scrutiny and study. But what matters is that you understand it here, [pats heart] in the heart. That's because Christianity is a "lived" faith; it is a way of life for those who follow Jesus. It is an all-encompassing and continuous experience of conversion, which means that when you make the decision to follow Christ, you are putting yourself into God's hands. And God is like a potter who moulds his clay so that the shape is pleasing to him.

The shape we become under God's hands makes us not fundamentally different to who we were before, but closer to the person God made us to be. The fishermen Jesus called were changed by their encounter with him. They gave away their own life only to find it. And in the finding of their life, they became workers for the kingdom of heaven. Henceforth, they would be catching not fish, but people.

All of us are called to this work, which begins with our own encounter with Jesus, and learning from him about the kingdom of heaven. It is a sacred call which requires us to give our life to God, and to recognize how the saving grace of God is at work in us, and through us, for the realization of the kingdom of heaven. Through God's grace, we are called to touch the lives of others, to share the good news of the kingdom, and to serve as faithful disciples, as did the fishermen Simon, Andrew, James and John.

We do this by following Christ: that is, by reaching out to others, by taking a risk, but above all by showing in our own lives how the love and light of Christ is making a difference. When others see us, this is what we hope they see: a faith so strong that it carries us through the trials and tragedies of life. We hope they see the love we bear others, inspiring and generous. We hope they see us not as people who condemn others, or who hate others, or who judge others, but as people who are non-judgmental, welcoming and kind.

They will see us in all walks of life, from fishermen to tax collectors, from builders to accountants, from gardeners to social workers. They will see how we are like leaven in the life of the world - a small but important influence for good in a world that is fallen; a world that has need of healing and of hope. And so Jesus calls you to this task, dear friends, in the same way he called the fishermen: "I will make you fish for people." Jesus tells them.

Because this task is perhaps more than we can imagine doing under our own strength, let me finish with a prayer. Let us pray:

"Yes, Jesus, I will follow you wherever you may lead. I trust in your providence for me. Make me a true disciple, loving, faithful and generous. Help me with the gift of your Holy Spirit. Give me courage to stay the course, to endure the hard times and follow you to the end. Grant me the light of hope, for your love is faithful and life-giving, and I will do all that you ask of me. I know that life is precious, and filled with joys and sorrows. Bless all that I do, make me an instrument of your peace, and give me the strength to proclaim the good news of your saving grace to all whom I meet. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

Father David Beresford