

Put out into the deep water ...

... and let down your nets for a catch

A sermon given on the Fourth Sunday before Lent, 6th February 2022 – by the Vicar the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster

Luke 5:1-11

I've been struck by the story in the news recently about the woman who has been campaigning against 'smart motorways' and who, because of her efforts, has actually managed to get the program rolling out these motorways halted. The reason is because her husband was killed in an accident on such a motorway: he'd had a minor collision with another vehicle; they'd pulled into the inside lane; because there was no longer a hard shoulder, which is the characteristic of the smart motorways, they were then very vulnerable when a lorry hit them subsequently. And so this lady has devoted her life ever since to campaigning against these motorways where there is no proper hard shoulder. But before the accident, she probably didn't have a strong opinion about them. And you see this with all kinds of folk who become activists or campaigners or fundraisers. Many of those who fundraise for cancer research are people whose lives have themselves been touched by cancer, if not directly personally, then through close family or friends. If you're someone who was unable to attend a friend's funeral during lockdown, your political views about the parties at Downing Street may be much stronger than they would have been otherwise.

There's often a story about why people get involved in things when they could just be sitting at home. And I think Peter was a little bit like that in this morning's gospel reading. We see in that story a gradual journey from observer to player, from spectator to activist. Initially, Peter was just one of a crowd listening to Jesus, but not particularly committed. And then Jesus gets into Peter's boat and asks him to put out from the shore. That's a little bit more personal. Jesus is speaking to Peter directly and Peter needs to respond, but it's still reasonably straightforward, nothing Peter hasn't done before and it doesn't cost him anything. He's still very much in control and feels safe, even if now it is a little bit more public, just him and Jesus sitting in front of the crowd in the boat.

And we may feel much the same as part of the Church, happy to be part of a community, as long as we don't stand out too much; happy to take an interest in Jesus, perhaps, so long as it doesn't ask too much of us. Knowing Jesus is near can be comforting, as long as we stay close to the shore and we don't feel out of our depth and that this isn't having too disruptive an effect on our lives. But then Jesus asked Peter to do something more disturbing: *"Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch."* Leave the shallows behind, get out of your depth where your previous experience won't help you. I'll be there to guide you, says Jesus, but will you trust me? And Peter can probably think of all sorts of reasons not to trust Jesus: I've been working all night, he might respond, and I just want to go to bed; or he might say, I'm the fisherman here, and I'm telling you there are no fish in this spot because I've been trying it all night; but then, perhaps most of all, he could think, I don't want to risk looking a fool in front of this great crowd of people.

But Peter finds himself caught in the spotlight of Jesus's attention. He's no longer just a neutral spectator - he's being asked to get much more involved, to put himself on the line and what's it going to be, yes or no? And he takes a deep breath. He decides he's going to trust Jesus, and he says, 'yes.' And so he gives the order for the nets to be let down, and he's then overwhelmed by the abundance of the catch. But Interestingly, the climax of the story is not the miracle. Rather, it's Peter's sense of being in the presence of something he doesn't understand. His response to the miracle, all these fish in the nets, is not what you'd expect - I would have thought that his first response might at least be to say 'thank you' - but he doesn't. He says, *"Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man."* It's as if he's suddenly seeing Jesus in a whole new light, as if for the first time, and because of that, he's seeing himself differently. If he didn't feel out of depth on the lake, he does now. Suddenly, the presence of Jesus is overwhelming, and Peter doesn't know what to do or how to cope. All he knows is he's no longer in control, and at one level he just wants the feeling to go away.

And that sometimes happens to people we know: somebody gets an experience of God, which is completely new and overwhelming, and they don't know what to do with it - they just know something has changed. I once had a friend who, over a period of time was seeking Christ and asking all sorts of spiritual questions, and he said that when he became aware of the presence of Christ in his life, it was like being put in a washing machine and being tumbled about and disorientated. And I

guess that's what baptism points towards, a sense of a life no longer being our own, being overcome by a sense of God's presence and love and being taken and handed over to Jesus. And for Peter, it's all a bit too much.

But Jesus says, "*Don't be afraid.*" In other words, he seems to be reassuring Peter: this is normal; this is a healthy reaction; it's a good thing; there's no need to be afraid, even if you do feel out of control, because my intentions for you are good; from now on, your gifts and experience will serve me and my Kingdom; from now on, you won't just catch fish, you'll catch people.

And Peter finds himself no longer a spectator, safe in the audience. Now he's up on the stage playing a leading role.

So I wonder, what about you and me? Where do we find ourselves on this spectrum, from spectator to player? Is there anything in Peter's experience in this story, any stage in his journey, with which you can identify?

For many people, the last couple of years have been very difficult. Despite all our experience, skill and effort, we found it difficult to cope in such unprecedented times. For many of us, it's been exhausting simply to stand still. Unlike Peter, it feels like we've been fishing all night and have caught nothing. It feels like there's very little to show for all our efforts. And sometimes we have to be confronted with our own helplessness, before we can see the Lord in a new way - before we can trust him more fully and respond to him more personally, we may have to come to terms with our own sense of emptiness.

And perhaps as you hear this story, you may feel the spotlight of Jesus' attention focused on you, inviting you to launch out into the deep water and to put down your nets once again, even though you may feel you've done it countless times before.

Maybe you feel him inviting you to stop hiding in the crowd and to discover more of what he has for you. And I have no idea what that might look like for you - it will be different for each one of us: for someone, it might be their life taking a whole new direction; for someone else it might be taking a first step to mend a broken relationship; for someone else it might be setting aside time for prayer and to seek God more deeply. But whatever it means for you, let me encourage you not to pull back, but to hear this invitation as a generous one - we stand in the presence not just of the son of Mary, but of the son of God. And when we see that dimension to Jesus

Christ, it can be overwhelming. But it also draws us deeper into our own humanity, as we work out what it means to leave everything behind and to follow him.

Reading Texts

Luke 5:1-11

¹ Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, ² he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. ³ He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. ⁴ When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, 'Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.' ⁵ Simon answered, 'Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.' ⁶ When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. ⁷ So they signalled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. ⁸ But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, 'Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!' ⁹ For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; ¹⁰ and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, 'Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.' ¹¹ When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.