

“A Fish Story” – Luke 5:1-11

Since I have not yet caught a single fish in the salt waters of this glorious West Coast I am as yet unable to engage in that ages-old practice of telling fish stories. You know the kind, where the size of the fish caught or its weight grows gradually with each retelling of the incident. Or maybe it's the number that grows each time someone asks, “how's the fishing?” And if the story grows so much that it starts to beg credibility, the story then starts to take on some details ... after all, with very specific details it just had to be so, right? You know how it goes. It starts with, “oh, I caught a couple of nice ones” but soon grows to “yeah, I did well, caught a few, the biggest was about 15 pounds” then proceeds to “wow, what a day! Caught a bunch, threw back most, kept a few, biggest had to have been at least 15, maybe 20 pounds” and eventually to “oh man, greatest battle I've had this year ... tired after catching so many, it was the last cast of the day just off the point – the sun was going down, the wind was coming up, and this monster hit my line ... fought it for ages before it ripped the reel off my rod ... thank goodness I'd caught and kept another great one, oh must have been 20-25 pounds!” Somewhere in that fish story is a thread of accuracy, and the fisherman at least was pleased with the outcome.

Our gospel reading from Luke this morning is a fish story. In part it is a fish story because it is about fish, or at least about fishing, or more properly about fishermen, but even more so because it is the middle version of a fish story that starts in the Gospel according to Mark (1:16-20) and grows until we see it in the Gospel according to John (21:3-14). Now some of you are going to argue that can't be, if only because in Mark's gospel the incident occurs really early, following immediately upon Jesus' baptism by water and the Holy Spirit, whereas Luke places the incident quite a bit later, after Jesus' ministry in Capernaum and follow an interlude in the wilderness after Jesus had healed Simon's mother-in-law in Capernaum, and John portrays the incident as a resurrection event – the third, no less – in which the fishing disciples eat breakfast with the risen Jesus after the miraculous catch. I suspect at least some of you might join with biblical literalists in claiming that because of the huge differences in timing that there must surely have been three separate incidents, but that's a long, long stretch of the facts to fit an assumed reality.

I do agree with biblical literalists – and others – in that we need to begin with a faithful perspective, but I believe even more strongly that we need also to *finish* with a faithful perspective on God's grace revealed in Christ, and for me that means facing the differing details recorded in the text by three different authors about a single key incident, and coming to an understanding of not only why those differences were used by those authors but more importantly what is the underlying common thread of faith that runs through all three accounts.

As I pointed out a minute ago, one of the key differences among the versions relates to where the gospel author places this miraculous event – Mark very early, Luke fairly early, and John so late as to happen after the resurrection of Jesus. It is fairly clear that each of the authors is not necessarily seeking for historical accuracy with regard to this incident but rather that they are using it to highlight in different ways the divine power of Jesus.

It is in the various styles that we see perhaps the greatest differences of all. Mark's version is typical Mark – rapid-fire, abrupt, few details, immediate action. Yet for all its brevity it is Mark's version that we remember the best, particularly because of the catchy theme phrase that was turned into popular songs and hymns – “Follow me and I will make you fishers of men.” And they did – follow him immediately, that is. Both Simon and his brother Andrew, and then James and John (sons of Zebedee, we are always reminded) dropped everything they had (well, James and John left Dad with the hired crew) and followed Jesus.

Luke's version also reflects Luke's style ... longer, more detail, not so abrupt, more conversation, mixed agendas. Luke's "lake" is geographically more accurate than Mark's "sea." Here we have specifically two boats (a detail which adds realism) and a crowd pressing in on him. No mention of Andrew here by Luke, but Zebedee's boys are in the picture. Here Jesus does not merely walk by and summon the fishermen, but asked nicely to be taken out in the boat a bit from shore so he could speak to the crowds without being squeezed. Now we have the miraculous catch of fish – out in the deep water, so many that both boats were filled way over what the Coast Guard or Canada Fisheries and Oceans would ever have allowed! Stunned and awed by Jesus' powers of divination regarding fish, the fishermen tremble in fear, voiced by Simon Peter. The famous "fishers of men" is reworked by Luke and loses something, because we don't remember his version hardly at all ... a reassurance and a promise to be catching people from now on. And they followed Jesus, but not quite immediately as they brought their boats to shore (and presumably tied them up) before taking off on the new adventure.

John of course takes great liberties with the story, but adds even more details. The disciples fall back on their first career, and when Simon Peter says "I'm going fishing" they all troop along. This time Jesus is not even in the boat but on the shore (powers of divination so great he can do it at a distance) and tells them not only to lower their nets in the deeper water but tells them which side of the boat to drop the nets over – now that's precision casting! Again huge success, and now we even have a number – 153 fish! No point in Jesus inviting them to come along on with him, for he has already gone where they cannot go, but he does invite them to eat breakfast with him, and they supped on bread and fish in what surely was one of the first post-resurrection communions.

There are some key differences among the versions in the participants as well. All three have Zebedee's boys as a constant pair involved in the doings. Mark, however, includes Simon and Andrew, where Luke has only Simon. One of the most curious differences between them is that in Mark's version this is where Jesus meets Simon, and he becomes a disciple. Perhaps Luke softens the call aspect because by now he already knows Simon – in fact he has recently cured Simon's mother-in-law over in Capernaum – but this is where Simon changes from Simon to Simon Peter. John of course has a whole crowd ... Simon Peter, Thomas the Twin, Nathanael from Cana (and we're reminded that's in Galilee), the Zebedee boys, and two other disciples, one of whom might be the "disciple Jesus loved" who first recognized Jesus and alerted Peter. Not only has the catch grown as the story gets retold, but the catchers have grown as well.

Let's take a break here for a moment. I'm sure that at least some of you – perhaps even many of you, especially those of you who have never been to one of my bible studies – are wondering to yourselves, "why is he tearing these sacred stories apart?" Let me reassure you, I'm not 'tearing them apart.' Neither am I trying to claim that the authors were embellishing the story simply to make it sound better. I believe that both Luke and John recognized in this quick, brief incident in Mark's account something profound about Jesus, and that each of them wanted to convey to their readers the profound importance they themselves saw in it. Each has taken a common and deep message that threads through the story and emphasised it in their own way, to help us understand the depth of Jesus' connection with God.

That common thread of faith woven through all three versions is the divine power of Jesus, the display of power revealing that this man was connected with God in a way like no other. Whether some fish, or a couple of boatloads of fish, or 153 fish the message is the same – this man had unique knowledge of and power over even nature, power over even the unfathomable things that occupied the scary depths, power over even life and death itself. It is

also clear that all three authors want us to understand without a blink of hesitation that there was some divine power of God at work in Jesus that attracted people to him like iron filings to a magnet. This power was not only visible to those who flocked in droves to press around him, listening for a word or praying for a miracle, but so intensely felt by those he called that they could not resist him, and offered themselves and their lives to him at the drop of a hat, or more accurately a fish net.

In addition to the demonstration of God's power at work in Jesus, there are also some motifs woven through the stories, especially in Luke and John's expanded versions, that provide a model of how we can respond in faith. Of course there's the "follow me" motif, but that's preaching to the choir, because pretty much everyone here is here because you've already decided to follow Jesus. This motif thus provides us with a reassurance that we – like the apostles and faithful before us, and our fellow Christians beside us – have made the right choice and are indeed following the Master.

But there's another powerful prototype for Christian response here that is often overlooked, and that is responding to Jesus' direction to do something different, or at least differently. "Move out into deeper water and give it another try", Jesus tells his disciples-to-be, and they respond in an all-too-familiar way, "We've tried everything and it didn't work, but if you say so, we'll try this new thing, but we don't really expect it to work!" Or the example of making just a simple little change, like dropping the net on the right side of the boat after trying a kazillion times on the left without any success. These don't necessarily mean major shifts into deep and unknown waters. I'm sure we can, if we stop and think about it, begin to recognize places where we can change the side of the boat on which we drop the nets: a subtle shift from greeting old friends as they come in the back door to focus on greeting new friends as they come in the front door, for example.

So, this is indeed a fish story, but not a fishy story. While we see some parallels with the ever-expanding tales of a good catch, what we really hear is the ever-expanding response to God's call to redemption in Jesus of Nazareth, the Master, the Christ. This story, in all its versions, had such a profound effect on people that the fish became a sign for believers to identify each other, a sign helped by the acrostic formed by the letters of the word for fish in Greek – 'IXTHUS' in which each letter stands for a word: the 'I' for Jesus, 'X' for Christos, 'TH' for God, 'U' for son, and 'S' for saviour. From humble beginnings on the shores of a lake we hear the story of people responding one-by-one, then at least 153, then in droves and boatloads. Each in turn has heard the call, expressed in various languages and various ways, "come", "follow me", "do not be afraid", "I have a mission for you" and has responded, until today we are here, we too hear the call and the assurance from this IXTHUS, this Jesus, Christ, Son of God, our Lord and Saviour.