



## Revd Ro's Reflection on The Fourth Sunday Before Lent 2022 Year C

**1 Corinthians 15.1-11**

**Luke 5.1-11**

Last week on Epiphany Four, we looked at the passage dealing with the presentation of Christ in the Temple in Jerusalem. I said then that at Candlemas there is a saying 'one look back to Christmas then turn towards the cross,' that is certainly true because we are now in the weeks before Lent. In today's gospel reading we see Jesus on the shore of the Sea of Galilee calling the fishermen. I looked at this as told in Mark's gospel on the Third Sunday before Advent. Luke's version differs in that he tells of the miraculous draught of fishes.

What I know of fishing you could write on a postage stamp but I have seen a great shoal of fish. Every year for about twenty years my family stayed in a cottage in Dorset. One year our friends, who owned the cottage, presented us with two fine mackerel caught that morning. 'Come with us this evening to West Bay, there is an amazing congregation of mackerel. It's quite a sight.' We went and looking out to sea from the shore you could see them. They were literally jumping out of the water, silver flashes in the evening sunlight. There were huge shoals of them and it would have been interesting to know just how high the number was.

Our gospel reading is from Luke five. In Luke chapter four he tells us that Jesus was teaching in the synagogues at the start of his ministry. We learn of his revelation in the synagogue in his home town of Nazareth when he reads from Isaiah 61.

'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor...'

He follows with these words, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' Jesus is telling them he is the anointed one, the Messiah, and that God's Kingdom has broken into the world. It is a

profound revelation. At first 'All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, 'Is not this Joseph's son?'

But this reception does not last, Jesus' next words enrage them.

<sup>4.23</sup> 'He said to them, 'Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, "Doctor, cure yourself!" And you will say, "Do here also in your home town the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum." '

<sup>24</sup> And he said, 'Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's home town.'

Of course they had heard of Jesus' teaching and looked forward to seeing him perform miracles; after all he was their man wasn't he? Jesus makes it very clear that he is doing God's work; he is not there to perform wonderful acts to impress people. And actually it is usual for prophets to be rejected by their own people. That's enough for a crowd to try to kill him.

<sup>29</sup> 'They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. <sup>30</sup> But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.'

I begin with this because it is already clear that now, right at the beginning of his ministry, things are not plain sailing. There is opposition, there is danger, indeed Jesus is in danger of being killed.

Jesus leaves Nazareth and goes, Luke tells us, to Capernaum, a city on the north western shore of the Sea of Galilee. It is worth pausing to look at the area where Jesus spent time during his ministry.

The Sea of Galilee had several names. It is referred to here as the Lake of Gennesaret in other places the Sea of Tiberias. It was a populous area with nine cities on its shores. The Lake is about 686 feet below sea level and therefore is the lowest freshwater lake in the world. Only the Dead Sea is lower and that is salt water. It lies in a rift valley and ravines run into it. They act as wind channels; that is why sudden storms could rage on the lake as we see in several gospel accounts. It is due to the fact that it is so low that the area around The Sea of Galilee has a tropical climate. It was fertile land and that together with the abundance of fish in the lake meant it was populous in Jesus' day, hence the nine cities around the shore. Luke tells us,

<sup>4.31</sup> 'He went down to Capernaum, a city in Galilee, and was teaching them on the Sabbath. <sup>32</sup>They were astounded at his teaching, because he spoke with authority.'

That is important. Jesus has been baptised by John, he has faced and overcome the temptation in the wilderness, he is filled with the Holy Spirit and he is beginning his mission. Luke tells us that he 'spoke with authority.' That is the authorisation of God. It is there in the synagogue in Capernaum that Jesus heals the man with an unclean spirit. People are naturally astounded. This young rabbi is different.

<sup>36</sup> 'They were all amazed and kept saying to one another, 'What kind of utterance is this? For with authority and power he commands the unclean spirits, and out they come!' <sup>37</sup>And a report about him began to reach every place in the region.'

Luke is very specific in his detail. Jesus will soon call the fishermen but Simon is not a stranger to him. Here we are told of the healing of Simon's mother in law; Capernaum is Simon's home,

<sup>38</sup> 'After leaving the synagogue he entered Simon's house. Now Simon's mother-in-law was suffering from a high fever, and they asked him about her. <sup>39</sup> Then he stood over her and rebuked the fever, and it left her. Immediately she got up and began to serve them.'

It is sometime later, after Jesus who has been in Judea, returns to the lake that our gospel passage begins,

'Once while Jesus was standing beside the Lake of Gennesaret,'

Jesus has been alone, teaching and healing now he is ready to call his first followers. We are told a crowd had gathered to hear him. Indeed his fame is spreading far and wide. People wish to hear and see this young rabbi who is different because he teaches with authority and because of his acts of healing. No doubt many people have come hoping for a cure. As Jesus faces the crowd on the shore he realises that he will be more visible from a boat,

'the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, <sup>2</sup>he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. <sup>3</sup>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.'

As I have said Jesus knows Simon so there is nothing unusual about this. What seems unusual is that the crowds can hear him clearly. Well this is another phenomenon associated with the Sea of Galilee. Along the shore south of Capernaum there are coves that make natural amphitheatres with similar acoustics. It is possible to stand on the shore and be heard on the hillsides, so the crowds would be able to hear Jesus distinctly from Simon's boat

It is after Jesus has finished speaking that he turns to Simon.

<sup>4</sup> 'Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.' <sup>5</sup>Simon answered, 'Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing.'

That is an unusual command. The fishermen had been cleaning their nets after toiling all night. Night time was of course the best time to catch fish. These men were experts; they knew their trade and had a lifetime's experience. What Jesus was asking didn't make sense according to fishing lore. Look at Simon's words; you can sense the initial consternation. We have been hard at work all night and he must have been thinking we are shattered and I'm longing for bed. But what follows is this,

'Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.'

Simon knows Jesus, I have said they are not strangers and he knows enough to trust him implicitly and to obey him. It reminds me of Jesus' words in the Garden of Gethsemane, 'Not my will but yours be done.'

<sup>6</sup>'When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. <sup>7</sup>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.'

This is interesting; it is not only the miraculous catch, after working for nothing all night, it is the abundance. It reminds me of the water turned to wine in the huge containers, wine in abundance.

That is the thing about Jesus: he gives life in abundance, blessings in abundance. He turns lives around as he turns nothing into plenty.

Simon Peter's reaction is interesting. Not, how did you do that? No, he has faith in Jesus, he has seen what Jesus can do, he has heard his teaching. This man is special, he is of God; compared to that it is Simon's sense of his own flawed humanity that comes to the fore.

<sup>8</sup> 'But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, 'Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!' <sup>9</sup>For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken.'

We can all think that, all feel like that, I am not worthy. Think of the words of John the Baptist to Jesus. The point is Jesus calls us as we are.

<sup>10</sup> 'and so also( amazed) 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.' <sup>11</sup>When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.'

Here we have those words of Jesus, repeated so many times. 'Do not be afraid.' These are not highly educated people, they are not rich, and they are not of high status. They are poor men, flawed human beings, they are like us. Jesus calls them though and without hesitation they draw the boats to the shore and follow him. This is the life changing moment. They are leaving everything they know, they are walking out in faith. Nothing will ever be the same. They will have no home, no security, a life on the road and ultimately a dangerous one and for most it will end in a martyr's death. They take the largest step of their lives these first apostles and their teaching, their spreading of the good news will bring the Christian church to birth.

Jesus calls us too, few of us will leave home or job but we follow Jesus as best we can. One of the presents I received this Christmas was a plant and on the pot it said, 'Bloom where the Lord planted you.' that, I think, sums it up for most of us. Jesus turns our lives around and the lives of all who follow him in faith and trust. As with those first disciples it is our commission to tell others of Jesus' love for them and to show it too.

Jesus is the fulfilment of the scriptures; God's story told throughout the Old Testament. This was God's plan from the beginning. Now these humble fishermen by joining Jesus become part of the story that will come to culmination at the resurrection. This leads perfectly on to the reading from 1 Corinthians. Maybe to understand this passage better we need to look a little further on to what Paul writes in verse 12 onwards.

<sup>12</sup> 'Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? '

People in the pagan world did not believe in resurrection, some Jews didn't either, particularly the Sadducees. That's the first thing to understand, those Jews who did believe in a bodily resurrection on the last day, think of Martha talking to Jesus.

<sup>23</sup>Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." <sup>24</sup>Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." (John 11)

It is when Jesus replies that everything is turned around.

<sup>25</sup> 'Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, <sup>26</sup>and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.'

That is the central belief of Christianity; Jesus was raised from the dead. It was a bodily resurrection on the third day and in God's time our perfected bodies will be raised. This is Paul's point, the resurrection of Jesus Christ is central to everything. Without it there is no true Christian belief, as he says at verse 17.

<sup>15.17</sup> If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. <sup>18</sup> Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. <sup>19</sup>If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. <sup>20</sup> But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.'

That is the point, Christ has been raised and he gives a list of witnesses. What follows is like a resumé of Paul's teaching.

<sup>15.1</sup> 'Now I should remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, <sup>2</sup> through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you.'

Paul tells them clearly that he will reiterate the central tenets of the faith passed on to them by him and Peter and all the other witnesses to Jesus Christ.

<sup>3</sup> 'For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, <sup>4</sup>and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures,'

Those words 'in accordance with the scriptures' refer to the Jewish scriptures, our Old Testament. Paul is writing before the gospels. The Jewish scriptures were the story of God's people but also God's story, his plan, his promises and Jesus is the fulfilment of them. The Corinthian Church might be new but their roots now go way back into the story of God's people. Here in a few lines Paul talks of Jesus' death, his life given in love at Calvary. He gave his life and won salvation for all who believe. He was buried but on the third day he rose from the dead. Paul wants them to be in no doubt about the truth of the resurrection, the central tenet of the faith. There is a list of those to whom Jesus appeared in bodily form.

<sup>5</sup> 'and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. <sup>6</sup> Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. <sup>7</sup> Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.'

Cephas of course is Peter; James is the brother of Jesus and the leader of the church in Jerusalem. An apostle literally means 'one who is sent' but the apostles are generally considered to be those who had seen Jesus and witnessed to him.

What we have here is a resumé of the growth of Christianity from its beginning in the incarnation, to the teaching of Jesus, his death and resurrection and the spreading of the good news by his followers the apostles. This of course links back to our gospel reading and Jesus' calling of Peter, Andrew, James and John.

<sup>8</sup> 'Last of all, as to someone untimely born, he appeared also to me. <sup>9</sup> For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God'

Paul is the last of the apostles because he was the last to encounter the risen Christ on the Damascus Road. The other link to that gospel story is that God chooses those he wants and it is not always because we are worthy. Peter saw his flawed humanity and Paul expresses this clearly. He is, he says, 'the least of the apostles' because he was the leader of those persecuting the Christians.

'Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.'

It is while on the way to continue the persecution that the encounter on the Damascus Road turned his life upside down.

<sup>3</sup> 'Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. <sup>4</sup> He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" <sup>5</sup> He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.' (Acts 9)

It is as amazing to Paul as it is to us that Jesus chose the very person who was leading the vendetta against his followers.

<sup>10</sup> 'But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace towards me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them—though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. <sup>11</sup>Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe.'

Paul is quite clear that God has chosen him and he has changed completely, but he is saved through God's grace, freely given. That grace is God's gift to us. We need to do something about it, it is not enough to simply say, 'I believe.' Paul has worked hard because the Holy Spirit is strengthening him. We do what we can because God is with us, not in our own strength alone. 'With God's help we will' are central to the answers given at a service of ordination.

Paul is one of a long line of witnesses to the truth of Jesus Christ. Lives need to change to be in accord with the teachings of Jesus. Lives need to be lived in love for him and others. We are part of that process. God is working his purpose out and the new creation will come to fruition and what will continue into that world is love.

*'Bind us together with cords that cannot be broken. Bind us together Lord, bind us together in love.'*

Bob Gillman

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