10 February 2019: Choral Eucharist
The Fourth Sunday before Lent
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+ ‘Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.’ (Luke 5:10)

Who were you in the gospel story we just heard? When you listened to that familiar tale, set on the shore of the Lake of Gennesaret (the Sea of Galilee) with whom did you identify? Were you one of the fishermen, exhausted after your long and fruitless night on the water, longing to get the last routine bits of work finished and go home to sleep.

Or did you identify with Simon Peter? You shared the reluctance of the other fishermen to launch your boat again and with them were amazed by the miraculous catch of fish. But you could not respond to that abundant gift with praise, thanksgiving and rejoicing. Fear and awe at being in Jesus’ presence overwhelmed you, enhancing your sense of your insignificance and of your unworthiness and sinfulness. Like Isaiah whose response to his vision of the almighty was to lament his unworthiness, you could not say, ‘Forgive me, teacher, for I have sinned’. Instead you had to push Jesus away: ‘Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinner.’

Maybe you preferred to see yourself as either James and John, one of the sons of Zebedee. That would make you a key player in the narrative, directly experiencing the miracle, and willingly responding to Jesus’ call. But perhaps you also managed to stay aloof, distancing yourself from Peter’s emotional histrionics. When Jesus said to Peter, ‘do not be afraid’, you, too, were comforted. Whatever your own doubts and insecurities, you managed to keep them hidden. You contrived apparently to turn away from your boat, your nets, and your own father without hesitation to follow Jesus and take up a new life with him, fishing for people.

And what about Zebedee, the brothers’ father? I’ve often wondered about what he felt on this occasion. His fishing business was in tatters and he and his wife faced an uncertain future now that the family’s economic partnership with Simon Peter was now at an end.
At its simplest, this is a story about the call to discipleship. A call to which all who profess Jesus as Lord have responded, each in our own way. So, whomever it is in this narrative with whom we find we feel the closest affinity, their story can readily be set against our own recollections of how we reacted as individuals when Jesus called us to follow him. Whether we can talk of a specific occasion when we saw, or felt, or heard the Lord’s call, or whether our journey towards faith was more gradual, based on reading and reflecting on the scriptures and participation in worship, most of us are able to see, at least in retrospect, the difference between what it is to be a believer and what life was like before we believed. Even those of you lucky enough to have been brought up in devout Christian households where prayer and worship were central to your lives from your infancy, are likely to recognise a time when childhood certainties evolved into mature faith and understanding. For each of us, turning to Christ involved not just acceptance and welcome of his promises, but a laying aside of aspects of ourselves and our lives that were incompatible with adherence to his teachings.

For Simon Peter, James and John, God’s call meant more than this: they gave up everything, left work, family, home and lakeshore to follow their teacher and their Lord. What they could not then know, was that Christ called them not only to hear and respond to his teaching, but to share his earthly ministry with him, to witness his suffering and death at Calvary, and to encounter him again after the resurrection. At his ascension, Jesus sent them out as his representatives to take the good news of the gospel to Jews and gentiles alike. As apostles, these men modelled a very particular kind of discipleship, one to which later generations of ministers have sought to conform.

In its focus on God’s call, this passage relates directly to vocation, whether to discipleship, to the religious life, or to active ministry. Note how humble obedience lies at the heart of Luke’s account of how the three came to be Christ’s disciples. None of them wanted to put their boats out again after such an unproductive night, but yet they all did as Jesus asked. Although Peter couldn’t refrain from observing that he thought doing so would be futile, he nonetheless obeyed, and agreed to let down the nets. His obedience in that act found reward in the miracle of the fish. Peter struggled to cope with what this sign meant, but when it came to the point, Jesus’ injunction not to fear calmed him. His experience of God’s grace at the moment of his revelation, gave him the strength to turn and follow obediently.

Luke derived this story from the much briefer account in the first chapter of Mark’s gospel. There Jesus encountered not just Peter, but also Andrew his brother, as well as
James and John by the lake of Galilee; he called all four fishermen to come and fish for people. That Mark located this story in a maritime context may help to explain why, when Luke expanded the episode with an account of a miracle of plenty, he chose to describe one relating to fish.

Yet, there is one significant difference between Luke’s account and Mark’s which casts fresh light on this passage. Mark defined Peter and Andrew as fishermen, using a Greek noun, *halieus*: a fisherman, from *hals*, the sea. So, when in our translation, Mark had Jesus say, ‘Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people’, the Greek text had read literally, ‘I will make you fishermen of men.’ But Luke used a different construction. ‘Do not be afraid’, Jesus said, ‘from henceforth you will be catching people’, or, more literally ‘you will be catching people alive’. As a former Dean of Christ Church, John Drury, pointed out in his study *Tradition and Design in Luke’s Gospel* (pp. 66-7), Luke used the verb *zogreo*. That word occurs in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, to denote rescue from the peril of death, not the capture of animals. Luke’s choice of a word meaning ‘to catch alive’ was thus, in Drury’s words, ‘as inappropriate to the act of fishing as it was appropriate to the Christian mission that the calling of Peter and the sons of Zebedee initiated’. Christ called the first disciples not to replace their nets full of dead fish with dead human beings, but rather to save people from death, to catch them in their metaphorical nets in order to save them for the kingdom.

This made me wonder if there is another sort of identification that we might make when we listen to this story. We do not have to lament with the empty-nesters Zebedee and his wife, whose sons abandoned the family’s fishing boat to seek their own way in the world. Nor do we necessarily have to see ourselves like Simon Peter, always destined to say the wrong thing, to get the wrong end of the stick (and thus, in the end, to betray our Lord). Supposing we stopped trying to put ourselves at the centre of the narrative, imagining ourselves as leaders? We could then stop worrying about whether we would, if faced with such a choice, have had the strength of mind and character to offer the same obedience as did Peter, James and John. What if we are not the men? What if we are the fish? How would that change our reading and understanding of the story and the miracle at its heart?

Christ called his disciples, and their successors, to gather people into the kingdom as once Peter, James and John had gathered fish into their nets. That injunction was not a call to haul dead fish, tangled up in nets, onto the shore. Rather, Jesus called his disciples to save living souls from the death of sin, and to free them for life in his kingdom, so that they
might share in the good news of the gospel in all its fullness. The symbol of a fish became in the early church a powerful (and in an era when Christianity was still persecuted, a relatively safe) symbol for believers secretly to declare their adherence to the new faith. The letters of the Greek word for fish, *ichthys*, spelt out an acrostic meaning: ‘Jesus Christ, son of God, Saviour’ (*Iesous Christos Theou Yios Soter*). Use of the letters of this acrostic, or simply the image of a fish (or both together) on Christian artwork and funerary monuments in the early days of the Church provided a means of making a public profession of faith in the divinity of Christ, the Redeemer of mankind, that only fellow initiates could read and understand.

The act of baptism, the washing away of sins in water, creates another parallel between conversion and fish. As believers, we are Christ’s fish; we share in his baptism and also in his resurrection through the Eucharist. Just as fish cannot live out of water, so the Christian cannot live outside Christ. As Tertullian wrote in his treatise *On Baptism*, ‘we, little fishes, are born in water, after the example of our *Ichthys*, Jesus Christ. And we have safety in no other way than by permanently abiding in water.’ ‘Happy is our sacrament of water’, he wrote, ‘in that, by washing away the sins of our early blindness, we are set free and admitted into eternal life!’

As we prepare to encounter Jesus Christ, the Son of God, our Saviour anew in this eucharist, let us cast aside the nets of pride and self-importance with which we too readily ensnare ourselves, and open our hearts to hear and proclaim the good news of his salvation, swimming freely and joyfully in the security of his abiding love.