



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, September 26, 2021
The Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Festal Evensong
4pm

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Matthew Moretz, *Vicar*
on
Luke 5:1-11
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Fish out of Water

Geologically, it's actually a lake, the lowest freshwater lake in the world, a vital source of life for the people of the Promised Land, with waters known, not only as fresh, but as sweet. It was fed by the River Jordan, as well as underwater springs. So both sacred and primordial. Since the invasion, they called it the Sea of Tiberias, after the resort that the Romans built on the western shore. For the Jews, and other old-timers, it was the Sea of Galilee, or even the Sea of Gennesaret. Some said it was in the shape of David's harp.

It was after a controversial sermon that Jesus had to escape his hometown with his life, fleeing to the northern shores of that sea. I always wondered why, out of all the places, he went there, to the village of Capernaum on the north shore of the Sea of Gennesaret. This community of fifteen hundred or so was the place of a strong synagogue. I went there one time. You can walk in the ruins of that synagogue where Jesus preached, and walk the streets where Jesus lived. Some say that Capernaum was a fine place to escape from the persecution of Herod Antipas, who ruled Galilee and had killed John the Baptist. Capernaum would have given ready access to the Golan Heights, the realm of another governor, in times of danger. It was also near an important road that led to the great city of Damascus, so a good place to meet and build a movement and to spread the word. Matthew was collecting taxes on that road, before he met Jesus. Peter, Andrew, James, and John were fishing from those shores when he met them. This place would become the center of his ministry, before he set his face towards Jerusalem.

He preached at the synagogue, but he also took his preaching beyond the walls, after all the crowds were getting so big. He preached from a hilltop in the country, one of his most famous sermons was given there. When I went to Galilee on pilgrimage, I was taken to one place where it was said that Jesus preached, a cliff on the shore, which served as a kind of natural amphitheatre for the crowd and a crop of rock that served as an amplifier of the human voice. It didn't take much imagination to see the crowds gathered below. He also taught on the shore, and, when necessary, from a boat on the water, another place to be seen and heard. Not only that, a place to witness signs and wonders, which we just heard read about in our second reading, that astonishing draught of fish.

Now this giant haul of fish, expected by Jesus, but unexpected by all fishermen of any experience, a kind of professional impossibility, this haul of fish caused Simon the fisherman to fall to his knees and declare his unworthiness. Simon, who will become Peter, is astonished and convinced that Jesus is from God, but this doesn't lead him to embrace Jesus and cling to him, but to recoil. His impulse is to have Jesus leave his presence because he is not good enough, or even unclean. "Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord."

Is it shame, or is it a desire to protect Jesus from his own ill-repute? Whatever the reason, in the sight of all, Simon outs himself as a sinner, a grave thing to say publicly in a village with such faith as Capernaum.

But despite this awkward disclosure, Jesus proclaims that this is hardly disqualifying, that he has a part to play that matches his business skill quite ably, “Fear not, fisherman; from henceforth thou shalt catch men.” So not only does he release him from his sin, but he points to a path to release him from his fear, to follow him. Just as he used to pull a heavy load to the surface of the water, with Jesus, Simon will lift up many multitudes to the surface, to a higher plane, a more heavenly life here on earth, beyond their familiar world, out of the deep, where sin sticks, and fear rules, to the open air where sins are released and the angelic proclamation “Fear not” is the rule of the land.

If the image of being one of the Good Shepherd’s sheep is off-putting, how much more so is being one of the fish caught by the Good Fisherman! Given what happens to a fish after it is caught by the net, we might much more prefer the pastoral to the maritime imagery in Jesus’ thought. A sheep has a place to be, a pasture, a caregiver, a relatively long life. A fish-out-of-water, glistening in the harsh sun, flapping about, eyes agape, gasping for breath, who wants to be that. And yet, this was the image that stuck in the early days. The early Christians would put an image of the fish on their personal seals, we know this from a letter from Clement of Alexandria. And many know of the secret symbol of the fish written in the ground to identify fellow Christians in a time of persecution.

They were comfortable with the thought that they were fish who had been caught by God’s net, lives forever changed, this is not like the Galilean fish who are taken above their plane of existence to be served on a platter. Instead, they had been transmitted from an old life to a new one. One could talk about it as a kind of death, yes, or perhaps better, a new birth, not fish out of water, but a translation from a dead sea to a living one.

By the time of Augustine of Hippo, they had a long history of referring to Jesus himself as a Big Fish, the Ichthus, who swam among us, “in the abyss of our mortality, as though in the depths of the sea, and was able to remain alive, that is free from sin.” And it is Christ the Fish who led us little fish out of the dead waters of mortality into the immortal waters of Baptism.

Whether as a fish or as a dove, Christ still roams these waters, drawing ever more of us beyond the service, to new waters of grace and healing. Some of you are just starting to sense this, and for others this has already happened. Some of you have heard the call, and said yes, and your life has never been the same. Perhaps some part of you died, and something even more alive took its place. For your heart of stone was plucked from your chest, taken up from you, and what was given in return, was a melted heart, made for the love of Christ, made for the mercy of Christ. God and his friends above are those who yearn to catch us. And we are the singular fish of Creation that yearn to be caught, to be called from these murky, swirling depths and drawn to new waters, to a life that is beyond life, even as we live it.