



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York

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Sunday, February 7, 2010
The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

Choral Eucharist
at 11am

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, Rector
on
Saint Luke 5:1-11 and I Corinthians 15:1-11

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CAREER CHANGE

Simon answered [Jesus], “Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets.” St. Luke 5:1-11; also I Cor 15: 1-11

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Back in the early 1980s I baptized a venerable classics scholar. He was 84. He had translated the Iliad and the Odyssey. He attended church with his wife but, not being baptized, he had not joined her in Holy Communion. In his later years he translated the New Testament. To make a long and lovely story short, the day came when he decided to be baptized. I knew he once had reservations about the faith of the Church which had held him back from baptism, and I asked him where and when those reservations went away. He smiled and said, “Somewhere in Saint Luke.”

Perhaps today’s passage was part of that special somewhere. In any case, this morning Saint Luke tells a powerful story about Jesus, as well as about the relationship ordinary disciples can have with him.

Jesus was at Capernaum, staying with Simon Peter. Peter, his brother Andrew¹, and James and his brother John, lived and fished there in the Lake of Gennesaret, also known as the Sea of Galilee. Jesus had recently healed Peter’s mother-in-law of a high fever, among many other healings. Word got out, and a crowd came to see and hear Jesus, pressing upon him by the lake.

Jesus’ four fishermen-disciples had fished all night in vain, had beached their two boats and were washing their nets. Jesus commandeered Peter’s boat, which Peter put out a little for him, so that Jesus could teach the crowd without being pressed into the water. When the Lord finished speaking, he worked a dramatic sign of what he had been doing, and what he wanted Peter and the others to do. Here Jesus reveals not only that he is a powerful teacher,

¹ Andrew is not named here, but we infer him from verses 6 and 7: “they” beckoned to James and John.

but that he is a prophet who knows what will happen; indeed, he causes these things to happen.

“Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.” There are fishermen in my wife’s family. I have come to know them and good number of their associates. I cannot imagine speaking to them like that. But Peter had already seen enough of Jesus to overcome his experience and expertise and, instead, to obey. “At your word I will let down the nets.” And then, as my Grandson might say, “Ka-boom!” God, as the saying goes, showed up.

Jesus foresees, directs, incarnates God’s power. The contrast between conventional wisdom and resources on the one hand, and the reality of divine power and fulfillment on the other overwhelms, actually threatens the fishermen. The nets are breaking, the boats are in danger of sinking because of the great shoal of fish.

And now comes the relationship between God incarnate and his disciples. The sight of all this fells Peter, with whom so many of us, of all shapes and sizes, can identify. He falls down at Jesus’ knees and says the natural, honest thing, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man O Lord.” He has seen the *mysterium tremendum* of the holiness and power of God, not in a figure but eye to eye. But then what do we hear from the Lord? – a tender word and job to do! “Do not be afraid; henceforth you will be catching men.” After that, it shouldn’t surprise that they left everything and followed him.

“Somewhere in Saint Luke” could be in Luke’s Gospel or in his second volume, the Acts of the Apostles. Open that second volume, and early on you read of Peter, now filled with the power of the Holy Spirit after the Lord’s death, resurrection and ascension into heaven. Let me mention two instances very briefly, both of Peter working at the new sort of fishing mentioned by Jesus.

First, on the Day of Pentecost, Peter preached the first explicit sermon about Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. His sermon produced 3,000 baptisms. That’s twice our seating capacity here, packed in like sardines. The nets were breaking and it must have seemed the boat might sink. What to do with all these folks?

Second, later on and overcoming his prejudices against non-Jews, Peter had a vision of a net (!) lowered down from heaven with all sorts and conditions of creatures, clean and unclean, in it. Three times this happened; Peter, like many of us, required repetition to get it. So then he preached by invitation to a group of Gentiles, led by a Roman centurion, and baptized the whole lot of them. On he went, all the way to the capital of the Empire, honored as the great fisherman and pillar of the church. Yet it is easy to identify with him. He is so like us; as is his relationship to Christ.

Something mysterious, powerful, happens when you hear the word of God and hop to it. You are on an errand for the Lord. There is freedom and power in such service. It is not restricted to church leaders, or even to the precincts of the church. It applies to us all, and to our lives out there in the world, where God has placed us, and where we can do our clear duty.

And here at the church itself we have fine fishing equipment. And what a fishing spot! Look at this great house, which enshrines liturgy and music, preaching and teaching. At services and in the in-between quiet: It is the scene of prayer and worship, of communion, by the people of God who “swim” in here either one by one or in a great shoal. They seek many things: beauty, rest, peace and silence, comfort, solace, satisfaction of curiosity, warmth in the cold, cool from the heat; they may pray or not; they may just be still. But for

our part, as fishers, we need to be clear, as, for example, the Apostle Paul was so clear in today's Epistle. We need to be clear about why we are in business: Namely, that it is of first importance that, in accordance with the Scriptures, Christ died for our sins; that Christ was raised from the dead on the third day; and that he was seen, by Peter and the apostles, and by hundreds of others disciples. So we believe, and so we teach. Let us not fear to go fishing.

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.