

1 January 2012

Reading: Luke 5: 1-11 (NT page 1032)

5 One day as Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret,^a with the people crowding around him and listening to the word of God,² he saw at the water's edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets.³ He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from shore. Then he sat down and taught the people from the boat.

⁴ When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into deep water, and let down^b the nets for a catch."

⁵ Simon answered, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets."

⁶ When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break.⁷ So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink.

⁸ When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!"⁹ For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken,¹⁰ and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners.

^a That is, Sea of Galilee

^b The Greek verb is plural.

Then Jesus said to Simon, “Don’t be afraid; from now on you will catch men.” ¹¹ So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.

Background to the reading

Our reading this morning describes a scene on the shores of the lake of Galilee. It was a fresh-water loch in the district of Galilee in northern Palestine. It had different names throughout history namely: ‘the Sea of Chinnereth’; ‘the Sea of Tiberias’, ‘the Lake of Gennesaret’ as in our reading and even ‘the waters of Gennesaret’. Elsewhere, it is referred to simply as ‘the lake’ or ‘the sea’. It appears as ‘the Sea of Galilee’ in Matthew’s Gospel.

The lake is approximately 700 feet below sea level and has a maximum depth of 150 feet. The Jordan River, carrying the melted snows of Mt. Hermon, enters the lake from the north, flows through its thirteen-mile length, and continues its course after leaving the lake along the southwestern shoreline. The water surface of the lake varies according to the season and the amount of rainfall. At its widest part,

the lake measures about eight miles, and its circumference is about thirty-two miles.

Due to the height of the hills (1,200 to 1,500 feet) surrounding the below-sea-level lake, abrupt temperature shifts occur, causing sudden and violent storms. The northern end of the lake has little protection and remains subject to strong winds.

Fishing, agriculture, and fruit growing added to the attraction of the area. Some forty different species of fish inhabit the waters, and salted fish were exported widely throughout the Roman Empire. Fishing still remains an important occupation of the region today.

Luke tells us that Jesus was standing at the Sea of Galilee and saw two boats left by fishermen. They were washing their nets. Naturally nets had to be cleaned after each fishing expedition.

Then he climbed in one of the boats belonging to a Simon and asked him to take the boat into the sea so that He could address the crowd at the shore. Later in our reading Simon's second name is mentioned namely Simon Peter. His given name was Simeon bar-Jonah which meant "Simon the son of John," which was common Semitic classification. It is most likely that "Simon" was not merely the Greek equivalent of "Simeon" but that, having his home in bilingual Galilee,

“Simon” was the alternate form he used in dealings with Gentiles. In fact, it was quite common for a cosmopolitan Jew to employ three forms of his name depending on the occasion: Aramaic, Latin, and Greek. The double name “Simon Peter” (or “Simon called Peter”) demonstrates that the second name was a later addition. It is obvious that he was called “Simon” throughout Jesus’ ministry but came to be known as “Peter” more and more in the apostolic age.

Then Jesus said that Simon must go and let their nets down in the deep water of the loch. Simon replied that they have been fishing all night and that they could nae catch one fish. But Simon obeyed which made it quite unique for fishermen to listen to a rabbi on matters regarding fishing!

And then the miracle happens. They caught such a lot of fish, other members of their group had to come and help them. Because the overhead cost of equipment was high, fishermen often worked together in cooperatives; families would sometimes work together to increase their profits. Other fishing cooperatives are known from ancient Palestine, so it is not unusual for Simon to be in business with the family of Zebedee. Men working from more than one boat could let down larger nets than those working from only one; fish could then be emptied onto the boat or the nets hauled ashore.

Simon was so overwhelmed by the miracle and got on his knees before Jesus confessing that he is such a sinful man. He is not worthy to be in Jesus' company. But he was not the only one. Also James and John the sons of Zebedee joined him in his wonderful amazement.

Then Jesus said they must not be afraid, meaning worried about their sinful nature. From now on they will "catch alive" men as it says literally in the Greek text - meaning to be fishers of people reaching out to other people with the Gospel. They understood their calling and left everything on the shore and followed Jesus. Fishermen made a better-than-average income (even if they had had a bad night), so leaving their job is an act of radical commitment that they would expect to negatively affect them economically.

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Search me, O God

Sermon

The text verses for the sermon are: "⁴When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into deep water, and let down^b the nets for a catch.'" Then Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will catch alive men." ¹¹ So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.

^bThe Greek verb is plural.

I have read this text often before but it was only last week that I discovered something hidden that I haven't notice before. It seems as if there is a link between our two text verses in the sense that followers of Jesus have to be "fishers of men" in deep waters too.

And then this text came alive for me. We live in a world that is hostile to anything regarding Christ. As followers of Jesus we experience how difficult it is on a daily level to keep our faith despite all the attacks from people trying to make us look ridiculous. And yes even as followers of Jesus we often find ourselves in deep waters where we struggle to keep our faith, and hold on to the hope that we received through the redemption and resurrection of our lord and Savior. I mean it is not easy to stand tall when loved ones get ill, or die, when relationships break up, when we lose our jobs, when our children experience suffering and difficulties, and when other people keep using the name of the Lord in vain. And amidst all of this, Jesus expects us to be "fishers of men" telling others about our faith and hope in Him.

But this is exactly the message: Maybe we are in deep waters because the Lord wants us to show the world that our faith keeps us going despite all our struggles and suffering. The "deep waters" can

be the place where we find other people desperate to find faith and hope in the Lord. The deep waters might just be the place where the Lord wants us to show others that He is offering a helping hand, a loving and caring heart. But He expects you and me to tell them that He is our only Lord and Saviour.

But we must be prepared when we find ourselves in deep waters just like divers are prepared. We need to have a scuba wetsuit meaning we need to read our Bibles and be prepared to talk to others about our faith. We need to have a snorkel to see in the deep waters meaning we need to trust God's Holy Spirit to help us see the opportunities we face on a daily level. We need a diving cylinder to help us to breathe in the deep waters. We need to talk to God regularly and wait on Him so that we can know what to do when we do not know what to do next and how to handle any situation. We need dive gloves to touch and help our hands to function despite very cold conditions under water. We need God's love to touch our world and we can only have this love once we accept the love of God through Jesus Christ's redemption. This love will flourish when we share it with others. And this love will mean sacrificial love – love that loves despite regardless the person or the circumstances; Love that is a commitment of service and self denial. We also need diving boots to swim. And we can only swim in the deep waters when we take God's hand in everything we do, say and think.

If we prepare ourselves in the New Year with the armour of faith, we will not sink but swim to the glory of God. We will not suffocate when circumstances get the better over us. We will breathe because God's Spirit will help us.

So let us not be afraid as we go into the New Year to be followers of Jesus. Let us go into the deep waters with hope because He is there to help us to make disciples of men who desperately need the saving grace of our Lord. Let us do what Simon, John and James did – leave everything and follow Jesus – even if it means swimming in the deep waters!

May the Lord help us in 2012 to be fishers of men!

Amen