

# “Put out into deep water and lower your nets for a catch”

-- A Biblical Reflection for the Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C  
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The Sea of Galilee is a fresh water lake about twelve miles long and six miles wide. It lies some 685 feet below sea level and is about 200 feet deep. Fishing was and still is an important industry on the lake. The Sea is surrounded by high hills on all sides. The great difference between the air on the top of these hills and the air on the low-lying water can cause sudden, violent storms. This body of water is referred to in Numbers 34:11 as the Sea of Kinnereth (from Hebrew word 'kinnor', meaning little harp). In the New Testament, it is referred to as Lake of Genesareth, Lake of Tiberias, and the Sea of Galilee. Jesus' preaching centered around its shores.

According to Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus called his first disciples away from their fishing fleets on the Sea of Galilee. It was a natural barrier between the Jewish side on the west and the Gentile side on the east. The Gospel of Mark, in particular, has Jesus crossing the Sea of Galilee in a boat on a number of occasions. These crossings turn the Sea of Galilee into a bridge bringing Jew and Gentile together through Jesus' preaching and healing activities.

In the New Testament, the Sea represents the moment of conversion. On the Sea nothing happens normally, but always in abrupt, marvelous or very difficult ways. Some of the most dramatic nature miracles of Jesus take place on the Sea of Galilee. Mark 4:35 tells the story of Jesus calming the sea after a squall had blown up, threatening the lives of the disciples. Mark 6:45 ff. describes how Jesus walked on the waters of this sea and revealed himself to his disciples as “I am.” In John 21 we have the moving post-resurrectional breakfast scene of Peter's confession of faith and Jesus' confidence in Peter, the repentant sinner.

## **The acceptance of Jesus by Simon and his partners**

Today's Gospel story [Lk 5:1-11] takes place on the Sea and has been transposed from Mark 1:16-20, which places it immediately after Jesus makes his appearance in Galilee. By this transposition Luke uses this example of Simon's acceptance of Jesus to counter the earlier rejection of him by his hometown people. Since several incidents dealing with Jesus' power and authority have already been narrated, Luke creates a plausible context for the acceptance of Jesus by Simon and his partners. It is not difficult to observe the similarity between the wondrous catch of fish reported in Luke 4 and 5 and Jesus' post-resurrectional appearance in John 21:1-11.

There are traces in Luke's story that the post-resurrectional context is the original one: in Luke 4:8, Simon addresses Jesus as Lord [a post-resurrectional title for Jesus--see Luke 24:34; Acts 2:36--that has been read back into the historical ministry of Jesus] and recognizes himself as a sinner. As used by Luke, the incident looks forward to Peter's leadership in Luke--Acts [Luke 6:14; 9:20; 22:31-32; 24:34; Acts 1:15; 2:14-40; 10:11-18; 15:7-12] and symbolizes the future success of Peter as fisherman [Acts 2:41].

### **Set out into the deep**

In today's Gospel scene, Jesus is teaching by the shore and the crowds press in on him. Jesus spots the boat of Simon and gets in it, and asks him to launch out a bit from the shore so that he can preach from there. When finished, he tells Simon to take the boat into the deep water and let down his nets. Simon is wary: "Master, we have toiled all night and caught nothing!"...the weary words of a veteran who knew how frustrating the sea could be. But there was something about this Galilean that made one want to comply, so Simon let down his nets.

Despite the frustration of the nightlong toil, Simon's willingness to follow Jesus' suggestion to put out the nets into deeper waters prepares for the miracle about to happen. Simon is brought personally into the sphere of Jesus' mighty power, and that experience becomes the basis of a promise that is made to him. Though Simon, conscious of his utter sinfulness and unworthiness to associate with such a person as Jesus drops to his knees in reaction, he is reassured by Jesus, who promises him that he will play a role of gathering human beings into the kingdom that Jesus has come to preach. This he will do much as a fisherman gathers in fish in his net.

What follows is the "miraculous catch" - a whole school of fish, straining the nets and the boats to the breaking point. Peter sinks to his knees in awe before this mysterious figure: "Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man." In other words: "Depart from me, O Lord, for I am a sinner. If you only knew to whom you were speaking! My spirit is dull and my heart faint. I am a burden to all my companions and a laughingstock to those who know their trade. Depart from me, a sinner!"

But Jesus assures the awestruck disciple: "Do not be afraid, Simon, from now on you will be catching people." It was as though Jesus said to this discouraged Galilean fisherman: "I shall not depart from you. I know who you are. I know your past, but that is not what is important to me. I need your hands, your feet, your heart and your very life. There is hope for you! I have cast my nets wide, and you are my best catch. See how the net is breaking and the boat begins to sink. You have labored and toiled for many years without hope. Come now to labor and spend yourself with me. I will teach you to walk on water, to cast a net of light into the waters above the abyss. Do not be afraid, for I am with you."

### **A compelling call to a new life**

In Mark's account of this scene [1:16-20] and Matthew's [4:18-22] the fishermen who follow Jesus leave their nets and their father; in Luke, they leave everything [see also Luke 5:28; 12:33; 14:33; 18:22], an indication of Luke's theme of complete detachment

from material possessions. Discipleship is a powerful, compelling call to a new life: a call away from routine, away from frustration, to new purpose. Jesus, himself, was now calling them to be fishers of people, to be engaged in the struggle with the raging waters of the sea, the sea that was both the source of their livelihood, their food, but also the sea that was a mystery, a threat and chaos, the sea that could take their lives as well as feed them.

### **We are in this boat together**

Jesus gets into Peter's boat in order to teach the crowds; and from the Bark of Peter, the Church, He continues to teach the whole world. At certain times, during Church history, and perhaps in our own history, it might seem as if the light of the Spirit had been all but extinguished and that Jesus is no longer with us in the boat. But let us be honest and realize that the flame never went out and the presence of the Lord has never disappeared. The Church goes on, saving souls and journeying to its final harbor. In that blessed realm, beyond the seas of this life, all the things which threaten God's Church in this world will be gone for ever.

We all are in this boat together with the Lord himself. We must trust the Lord to show us the way, to bring us to our goals safely, and to feed our souls on the journey. We will no doubt encounter problems - there will be days when we cast out our nets all day long, and at the end of the day, there might be nothing to show for it.

At those times, we must listen to the Lord, as Peter did, and cast the nets again into the deep - for it is our faith that is being tested - not as to whether we profess it or not - but as to whether we are ready to do something about it or not.

We are not sailing on Noah's Ark or on the Titanic. We are on the waters with Jesus. I am reminded of the words Brother Luis de León, a mystical Spanish writer of the 16th century once wrote: "The more you navigate in God, the more seas you discover." The Lord does not abandon those who come seeking His mercy and His forgiveness. He walks upon the waters. He calms the storm. He guides the boat into safe harbor, and brings with Him the great catch, the great feast, to which we are all summoned - the daily feast of His Body and Blood, our food for eternal life.

### **Questions for Reflection this week:**

What have been the moments of your conversion? Have you experienced a "call" to discipleship? What experiences or people in your life have been instrumental in deepening your faith?

Are you able to identify with the disciples at sea? Is it possible to be a committed disciple of Jesus, yet still experience weakness and failure?