



Homily for 5/5/2019

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Easter, Year C

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*The 153 Fish*

Simon Peter said to them, “I am going fishing,” as if to say, “After all I have seen with Jesus, I still am not sure how to follow anymore, and so I will go back to what I was doing before.” But it is fruitless to go back: “That night, they caught nothing.”

When Jesus appears, they acknowledge their unfruitfulness. It is a repeat of the scene of Peter’s calling. Then, at his first calling, He dialogued with the Lord: “I have been fishing all night and have caught nothing, but at your command I will cast my nets,” and he was astonished at the catch of fish that day and left everything to follow. But now, without hesitation, he heeds the invitation to cast the net on the other side, and his obedience is rewarded with fruitfulness.

In this fruitful harvest, we hear a curious number given for the amount of fish in the net that the apostles drag to shore: 153. It is curious for its precision (153 precisely) and for its complete lack of explanation; there is no aid to tell us what that means in the immediate context of this Scripture passage.

All you have to do is google the significance of the number 153 in the Bible and you will find 153 different interpretations! Even the fathers of the Church are not consistent on their interpretation. Some will say it has to do with the sum of the first 17 prime numbers, others say it refers to Archimedes and his discovery of the calculation of a circle known as *Pi* and was used by St. John to preach the True Wisdom of Jesus to the Greeks.

I myself come down to two plausible answers. It could be that this was just a proof that John was an eyewitness to these events, as he will say just a few verses later: “It is this disciple who testifies to these things and has written them.” So his inclusion of the number 153 may just be an accurate number of the count of fish as John himself saw them. He would have included this number as a way of saying, “See, I was there; I counted them myself.” The other plausible answer is the one given by St. Jerome, in which he says that in the ancient world there was known to be 153 species of fish. This signifies that all nations of people were to be caught in the net of the Gospel. A variation upon the theme, was that there were known to be 153 nations of people in the world at that time. And this number would have signified that the whole world was to be caught by the Apostles’ work of preaching the Gospel - A universal mission.

Following this second interpretation leads us to great insights into the Apostles’ later courageous action of bringing the Gospel to the four corners of the world. They saw their mission as universal, not just confined to Israel. The world was primed to receive the Gospel and we see in the history of the Church an exponential growth that will have the worship of The Christ become the religion of the Roman Empire within three centuries! Today there are 2.2 billion Christians, making Christianity the largest religion in the world.

We see this Apostolic courage manifest after Pentecost, when even prison bars and threats of punishment do not dissuade them from the mission they have received to convert the whole world: “We must obey God rather than men.”

This prefigured the universal dominion of God and His Church prophesied about in John’s vision of heaven when he says: “Then I heard **every** creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, **everything** in the universe, cry out: “To the one who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor, glory and might, forever and ever.’ ”



Now this begs the question: *How we are to evangelize in our own day?* Are we still seeking the inclusion of all people within the net of the Church? Is it true that God desires that all people belong to His One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church. The simple answer is *yes*, this is God's continuing desire. Here at Sts. Peter and Paul we recently discerned a new Mission Statement that says just that:

The Basilica of Saints Peter and Paul in Chattanooga, Tennessee, exists to proclaim Jesus Christ, the font of all Truth, Beauty, and Goodness, and we continue His mission to form disciples from all peoples according to the tradition and patrimony of the Catholic Church.

Now this mission statement will strike some as contradicting the modern world's notion of multi-cultural pluralism. In this erroneous view, we are not supposed to evangelize and convert people to the Catholic Christian Faith. They will use words like 'proselytism' as a bad word. If by proselytism is meant using coercion to force people to convert to the Faith, then, yes, we should condemn this. But many, even members of the Church, have taken this to mean that we shouldn't even attempt to persuade non-believers to the truth of the Gospel because it might offend them. How absurd! That also is to be condemned. Christ's mandate to bring the Good News to all the nations remains for us today. We must do it in ways that respect human dignity, for sure. We shouldn't torture people, certainly, but how quickly people have gone to the opposite extreme of claiming that even mentioning Jesus in public is a form of torture for non-Christians! The truth is that everyone is going to praise him eventually - whether by desiring it or being constrained to do it on the last day at the final judgement - either bending the knee in reverent devotion in heaven or having the knee bent for us by the mighty arm of the Archangels in hell!

It is for us, members of his Church, to proclaim and persuade all people to do the former and to not suffer the latter! To dialogue, yes, but not simply to have a pleasant conversation, but with the aim of converting. To the Jews we hope to demonstrate that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah. Jesus is the fulfillment of Israel's hope. To the Muslim, we strive to convince that Jesus in fact is God, not just a prophet, and that He reveals God's desire for communion with the human race, not just one's subservience. To the Buddhist and Confucian we propose that Jesus is the Tao, the way, the path through which the whole world was made and who is the fulfillment of every desire not its destruction. To the Hindu we proclaim that Jesus is the One True God who took flesh out of compassion for His creation, whose death paid the price of all sin and whose resurrection frees humanity from the cycle of violence and death. To the atheist, we proclaim Jesus not as simply a good moral teacher, but as the Unmoved Mover of all that is and the logical beginning and end of all of nature.

In our post-modern, confused and intellectually weary day, we cannot be like Peter, who thinks just to go back to his old ways of fishing. Rather, we must be bold and confident because of what we have seen and heard, tasted and touched. To all people we must proclaim and announce that Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth and the Life and that we come to the fullness of communion with Him through His One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church.