

## Sermon Notes for Trinity 5

*From henceforth thou shalt catch men (Gospel)*

I take it that the Gospel is a narrative after the fact. The important feature of the story is the conversions and the punch line, not the catch of fishes. That is not claimed to be a miracle in the text; we are free to rationalise it if we choose. If we think of Luke as a companion of Paul in Jerusalem in the early sixties, and accept what little we know of the other disciples, then at the least Peter was still alive somewhere to give a full account of what happened to replace the very sparse narrative Luke would have found in Mark, as we do. Peter and Luke could have met in Rome. We do not have to assume that Luke made up everything that he did not find in Mark.

So Jesus taught as if the exercise of authority (the sitting position) was natural to him; and that teaching was attractive. We may assume, to Jews who made at least some attempt to practice the faith. Why? It was not a new set of obligations or prohibitions such as a scribe might offer (and which some then and now find attractive). Nor was it an incitement to revolt against Rome. Nor was it that the End was at hand. We presume, and I hope I am not falling victim to a tired liberal protestantism, that he spoke of the Father and that, if you turned to Him, then He would turn to you. But that turning is not a mere emotion, rather a giving of the whole life to God and his will. It starts from the recognition that "I am a sinful man", though Peter drew the wrong conclusion from the fact. It is a puzzle in the Gospels what Jesus really made of the "righteous persons which need no repentance", but the reception of "publicans and sinners" is certain. God can heal them. He chooses to do so. But they will mend their ways.

We cannot simply follow our Lord's practice. If he were here now, he would be at best ignored, at worst arrested. I know Wesley thought that street preaching was important to spreading the Gospel, but even in his time religious literacy was declining. We are now very far from being able to find almost-believers to convert. I wince when I encounter street preachers, because they are casting pearls before swine, shouting Gospel cliches at people who do not know what they mean. I doubt they have much success. But at least they are trying? Yes, very trying. In so far as they do not succeed, they make it less likely that any other presentation of the Gospel will succeed. It was possible to hope that the internet would enable us to present the Gospel better; we have not achieved much that way. Probably it is only personal contact (the opposite of shouting at passers-by) which offers hope, but that is hard in an impersonal world. In this country, we may not have been given "the answers". Perhaps we are so far gone that the Lord's plan is that we should fade away, to be replaced when he so chooses by missionaries from places where the faith remains alive. Jesus clearly had a two-fold purpose. Many were taught; few were recruited. Yet the recruits came from the wider body of hearers, and they proved adequate to lead the emerging Church. Our method (in all churches) is to recruit and train insiders. We cannot afford to train them well, so we end up with clergy neither expert (except perhaps in the Roman system) nor for the most part well-connected to the wider world. The theological college is not Jesus' way; we may have to ask whether it is (or has ever been) a good way. The non-stipendiary minister is nearer to the ancient model, but most of us are, frankly, insiders.

What most clergy respond to from the passage is "we have toiled all the night, and have taken nothing". I can apply it to myself, and to the other priests I know. We think we have done what we can (given our other obligations, and yet could we not have done more?) for many years, but converts are rare. We do not catch men. Are we getting the message wrong? Or do other aspects of our behaviour frustrate it? The disciples "forsook all and followed him". Is that required of us? What would it mean in practice, since the stipendiary minister has hardly done so? We are right to worry. We need critical support from the congregation we do have. We need prayer. We need mutual counsel, and yet it is very hard to meet for that purpose. Both priest and people need the recovery of Christian unity which has been the saddest failure of the last century. For our fragmentation has undoubtedly weakened us.

Doubt is one of the devil's weapons – but self-examination and repentance is essential to the Christian life. May the Holy Spirit teach us what is now required of us. Whatever it is, it will be our whole life, nothing less.