

CATCH OF THE DAY

(1 John 1.1-4 and John 21.1-14)

Catch of the day! That's the theme. So, it's all about fishing is it?

Well now, let's join that little group John tells us about in his gospel. They were at a loose end; they were really at a loose end.

There they were, the seven of them, sitting around, thinking back about their time with Jesus, that dreadful episode in the Garden of Gethsemane, the horror of the cross, the shame of their reaction to it (perhaps one more than the rest), the delight in their realisation, slow though it was (perhaps one more than the rest), that Jesus had really come alive again and that they had met him a couple of times. But, what now? Jesus had said a lot about the Holy Spirit, most recently when he had last been with them after his resurrection, but that seemed just words and nothing had really happened about it.

So there they were, looking at each other in that embarrassed silence which we have all experienced when a group of people has run out of things to say. They were at a loose end!

And who was it who broke the silence? It was Peter, of course. *I don't know about you lot, but I'm going fishing.* Back to what he and some of the rest of them knew all about, something....well....normal! *Good idea, we'll come along.* There was no plan about this – it was not that they had thought it through, whether and where they would be able to sell what they caught, probably not even where on Galilee they would fish. Not like the man fishing from the end of Saltburn pier. He knew exactly what he was doing and what he wanted.

He caught a huge bass. He tossed it back and caught another fish, medium sized. He tossed that back too. He cast twice more and each time caught two much smaller fish. These he kept. Another fisherman had seen all this and asked him why he had not kept the bigger fish. The reply – *Small pan!*

Anyway, off they went, late at night, down to the beach and got the boat into the water, checked the fishing gear, organised the oars and set off.

Bad idea, Peter, this going fishing! The fish just weren't around.

Came the dawn – a grey, misty, dawn. They weren't far from the shore but they could only just pick it out in the mist. Their attention is drawn to it as they hear a voice – *Have you caught anything, lads?*

'Ave we heck (I guess the language might have been a bit fruitier).

Try on the other side of the boat then.

John does not tell us their immediate reaction. Was it *Who's he think he is. What does he know about it?* Did they have a discussion about whether to give it a go? Was it *Well, I suppose there's nothing to lose?* Was it that the voice of that vaguely seen figure on the shore had a certain authority about it? Was it that they remembered an earlier occasion when they had fished all night and had nothing to show for it but caught fish when a certain man told them to try again? Whatever it was, they did what they were told and we know the result.

Just as it had to be the impulsive Peter who decided to go fishing so, one feels, it had to be John (the disciple whom Jesus loved) who recognised the shadowy figure on the shore as Jesus – surprised, delighted – *It is the Lord!* Equally it had to be that same impulsive Peter who plunged in to the sea and waded ashore. But let's note the order:

1. Jesus was recognised for who he was
2. Peter could not wait to get alongside him

The commentators love to spend time pondering the significance of that exact number of the fish in the net – 153. Today, let's just agree that it was a lot – an awful, an awesome, lot. Let's note the order of things again:

1. The command – *Cast the net on the other side of the boat*
2. The response – they were willing to do it
3. The change – to obey the command involved change – one side to the other
4. The effort - getting the heavy net in from one side of the boat and throwing it out on the other side.
5. The result – a result beyond imagining; fish upon fish upon fish

The command, the response, the change, the hard work, the result.

Last weekend, Gill and I were up on North Tyneside at the 60th wedding anniversary celebrations of the priest who married us. There was a celebratory service followed by a lunch. At the lunch I found myself immensely saddened. It was not that there was anything wrong with the food, or the venue or the company. Sitting next to me and opposite me were ladies who attended two

different churches and on the other side of me was a man who attended the Church where the service had been held. Each one said that their respective church numbers were declining. I asked what changes they had seen in their churches over the years. The answer, apart from one which had recently started Messy Church, was none. The man said he had been churchwarden for 40 years. In none of them were lay people involved in leading or preaching, or, in one case, even doing the gospel reading. It was all just as it had been for years.

I could not believe that Jesus, by way of the Holy Spirit, had not been saying something to them. What, I wondered, had he been saying to them. Had they even recognised the prompting of the Jesus Spirit? If they did, what had stopped them responding to him? Was it the fear of something new, something different, something uncomfortable, something that meant hard work or a greater commitment?

Cast your net on the other side. It wasn't Make a completely new net. It wasn't Climb up to the top of the mast. It wasn't Abandon ship! Jesus was not asking them to start from scratch or be completely revolutionary.

A former Bishop of Pontefract told of a church he had visited where he talked to a man who had (and I promise you this is pure coincidence) been a churchwarden for forty years. *'You must have seen some changes in the church during your forty years,' 'Yes, I have,* replied the churchwarden, *'And I have opposed every single one of them.*

Truth to tell, none of us (at least if we are over 30) is keen on change. It is uncomfortable and we do like to be comfortable, don't we? Lots of changes have taken place at St. Mary's over the years. If you have been coming here for a long time you will be able to make a long list of them. Even if you have not been coming for long, you will have noticed something different happening. If I were Judy Hirst (remember Judy?) I would be wandering up and down the aisle asking you to mention one of them. But I'm not and I won't!

Let me have my way among you - we have just sung it.

What is Jesus asking us to do and how do we hear his voice? Where is the Holy Spirit leading us and how do we sense his guiding hand? Well, it could be;

- a. A personal thing – an urging within us, sometimes as we pray, sometimes out of the blue

- b. A corporate thing – the prayerful discussions of the Ministry Development Team or the Worship Group or the PCC.
- c. A transmitted thing – someone suggesting a new way in which we can serve Jesus.

Right now, here at St. Mary's, two new things are afoot for us as a Church:

1. Picking up on Judy Hirst's sermon series *Growing in sharing our faith*. The MDT will be sharing with us further work on this and this will involve some sort of change for each of us; asking of us something different, something taking us out of our comfort zone.
2. Joining in the *Try praying* project, flagged up at the last meeting of the PCC and featured in this week's pew sheet. It's something which must surely be a win-win thing.

And at the personal level why not volunteer to be part of the Prayer Visiting and taking an active part of St. Mary's outreach to and love for the village? You may be specifically asked. Don't just respond with an automatic *It's not for me*. Jesus may be saying *This is for you*.

The command, the response, the change, the hard work – remember the sequence we saw in our gospel story? But did you notice that I left something out? You did? So what was it? Yes, the result – fish upon fish upon fish: well worth the response, well worth the change, well worth the work. In St. Matthew's gospel we find Jesus saying to Peter and Andrew *Come, follow me and I will make you fishers of people*. That is the concept, that is the promise!

It chimes in with that early part of St. John's first letter which Cheryl read to us. *We proclaim what we have seen and heard, so that you may have fellowship with us*.

That is what we are about in all sorts of different ways, with all sorts of different changes and chances.

Let me finish with a prayer by a former Bishop of Durham, written over a hundred years ago. It is still absolutely on the ball though I have modernised the language. Give it a loud Amen at the end if you make it your prayer.

O God, the God of all goodness and grace,
worthy of a greater love than we can either give or understand:

fill our hearts, we ask you, with such love towards you
that nothing may seem too hard for us to do or suffer in obedience to your will.
And grant that, loving you like that, we may become daily more like you
and finally obtain the crown of life
which you have promised to those who love you,
through Jesus Christ, our Lord, Amen.