

## **THE FISHERMAN**

*We have laboured all the night and have taken nothing, but at thy word I will let down the net.* – Luke 5:5

We heard these words read in the Gospel only a few Sundays ago; we heard the full account of how St. Peter, whose feast we are celebrating today, was called to his apostleship. Our Lord is passing along the lake shore, and wants to preach to the crowds. Preaching in the open air, you know, isn't such an easy thing as it looks. If your voice is to carry and to last out, you want to arrange your congregation as far as possible between you and something else; a wall or something of that kind, which will keep in the sound instead of letting it lose itself all over the countryside. And the best background you can possibly have is a cliff or a sloping beach, such as our Lord must have found, easily enough, by the side of the Lake of Galilee. But there's this difficulty about it – that a large crowd listening to a speaker always tends to edge forwards, the people at the back straining to hear better. And if you are standing with your back to the sea, talking to a crowd like that, you are being edged back yourself all the time towards the sea. Our Lord saw all that; and since he always preferred to use natural means where natural means were forthcoming, he found a practical way out of the difficulty. He climbed on to a boat, and stood on the raised stern of it, as if on a pulpit, and spoke to his audience from there. And the boat he chose was Simon Peter's.

Why he chose Simon Peter's boat, rather than that of St. James and St. John who were close by, I can't say. It is very odd, isn't it; a very curious coincidence, isn't it, that if one of the apostles is singled out for mention above the others it is always St. Peter? However, that may have been an accident; perhaps his boat was the handiest for the purpose. Only it was a fortunate kind of accident; there it is, our Lord stands preaching in St. Peter's boat; and it is not surprising that later ages, looking back with the eyes of faith over centuries of history to that first dawn of the Gospel preaching, have seen a mystical appropriateness in the arrangement. Peter's boat by the Lake of Galilee, or Peter's Chair at Rome – what difference does it make? From one as from the other Incarnate Truth spoke, and speaks.

And when the sermon is over, our Lord seems to make an apology for turning the boat into a pulpit for so long, and perhaps interfering with the fisherman's work as he does so. He turns to St. Peter, and suggests that he should put out and try his hand at fishing. Now, in the ordinary way there seems to be no hope in that suggestion; Peter has toiled all night and caught nothing. He has no reason to think that the great Preacher who has been his passenger that morning has any special knowledge of fishing or of the weather. If there was any chance, Peter should know. But Peter has been listening to the sermon. And already something tells him that this Man, who speaks to the crowds as one having authority, is worth obeying without asking questions. It is all against his professional instincts; "nevertheless, at thy word, I will let down the net."

And the net is let down, and the catch, as you will remember, exceeded anything Peter could ever have dreamed of. What do you think happened, exactly, when that miracle took place? I mean, did our Lord then and there create the fish which came into the net? Or were the fish swimming about elsewhere in the lake, and did he attract them to the spot? Or were the fish there all the time in the ordinary course of nature; and was there nothing miraculous about it except our Lord's miraculous knowledge of their presence? Well, I think we should all say that the first of those explanations is too elaborate; we don't want to multiply miracles without necessity. But the third, I think, is equally too simple; our Lord, surely, did more than merely know that the fish were there. Why else did the miracle make such an impression? "Peter was astonished", says the Gospel, "and all that were with him, at the draught of fishes, and so also were James and John." That means, clearly, that, even apart from the unfavourable conditions, the catch itself was one you could not have met with, by any natural means, in those waters. Our Lord didn't merely know that the fish were there, in a position to be caught. He brought the fish there, into a position where St. Peter could catch them.

Imagine yourself gifted with some supernatural insight, looking down under the depths of the dark lake that morning. You can see all that moves beneath the waters as clearly as if Genesareth were a vast aquarium. And you can see the fishes moving about here and there in silver shoals, intent upon their silly fish business. How they dart about this way and that, with an important flourish of the tail! And yet the sudden dashes they make seem, after all, to lead nowhere. Sometimes food attracts them, more often something which turns out to be quite uneatable; sometimes the throwing of a stone disturbs them, more often the passing of a harmless shadow. What are they all thinking about, down there? What are the aims, the delights, the tremors, that agitate the fish world below you? So much you can see for yourself, any time you will look into some clear pool in the Thames. But that morning, under

the Lake of Genesareth, something else was happening. All of a sudden, a little group of fishes here and there detaches itself from a shoal; and all these turn in one and the same direction, at one and the same moment, towards a particular corner of the lake, and all swim away together. No natural need, no natural alarm, accounts for this unanimous tendency; drawn by some unseen force, they forget their favourite pools and the overhanging rocks that sheltered them, and all head one way. The Lord of Nature has bid them come.

Those are you and me, those fish. All the souls that have been brought into the Church of Christ all through the centuries have been brought there because they were drawn by the grace of Christ, not for any other reason. Without grace, our lives, if we could see them in the true perspective, are all haphazard and purposeless, like the movements of the fish in the lake we were thinking about just now. We play about, in love with our own shadows, darting here and there at our pleasure, excited by a thousand perishable hopes, a thousand imaginary alarms; so brisk, so bustling, so self-important. In the midst of all that, a force that was not of nature drew us, we knew not why, we knew not wither. Drew us into the net the Church had spread for us; yes, it is Peter spreads the net, but it is Christ who draws the fish into it. From our Lady downwards, no soul ever attained the means of salvation unless it were drawn by the grace of Jesus Christ.

When the miracle was over, our Lord explained the meaning of it to his apostles. From henceforth, he said, you will be catching men. Our vocation as Christians does not starve or supersede our natural characters, it directs them and consecrates them to the service of God. Peter is a fisherman; very well, then, a fisherman let him remain; only in future let him fish for men. Why did our Lord number so many fishermen among his twelve apostles? Fisherman, after all, have not a very good reputation for telling the truth; and some of them are idle natures into the bargain. What is the quality our Lord saw in them? Once thing, I think, which he prized especially in those who were to be his apostles; an indomitable patience. "In your patience", he says to them, "you will win souls." They have toiled all night and have caught nothing; weary hours of waiting, in the hope that the grey light of dawn will bring sport – and it has brought none. What, put out to sea again under the burning sun of midday, when the very hull of the boat must cast shadows that will scare away the fish to right and left? Yes; "at thy word I will let down the net". There is no limit to Peter's optimism and Peter's endurance, so long as he is following his Master's orders. It is in that patience that he won, and wins, men's souls.

How she has waited, the Church of Christ, all down the centuries, and with how little regard to the maxims of human prudence and human skill! Not seizing her opportunity here and there, where circumstances seemed favourable; not trimming her sails to every passing breeze, but patiently issuing her invitation, and leaving grace to do its work. How many hopes she has seen fail, over how many apostasies has she wept; how she has seen the fashions of the world change about her, old creeds die down and new creeds replace them, the folly of yesterday turned into a the wisdom of today! Should she not by now have become hardened and cynical, her pity for mankind turned into a weary scorn, her ambitious hopes into the dogged persistency of despair? We might have expected it, but we were wrong. What if, here and there, she has toiled long and caught little for her Master? Still at his word she will let down the net; until his grace, bound by no law of proportion to human effort, brings her good fishing again. Despise her as you will, criticize her as you will, but do her the justice to admit that the patience of the fisherman is hers.

Will you forgive me if I leave you with this indomitable patience of St. Peter as the lesson of St. Peter's feast? A trite lesson, perhaps, but a difficult lesson to learn, and in these times especially. After all, we do live – it is time we admitted it to ourselves – in days of great discouragement. Those who are just growing to manhood or womanhood, in a world that seems so shut to honest effort, they will feel it most. We have toiled all night and taken nothing; do we not, inevitably, repeat that complaint as we look around us? Our civilization, so laboriously built up, the fruit of so much noble endeavour – and now it is threatened with collapse by forces not under our direction, perhaps not under our control. The British Empire, so great in its conception, say what you will of it, so wonderfully preserved and organized – and now it is beginning to show signs of breaking up. The Great War, fought and won, so we told ourselves, to save Europe and bring her peace and prosperity – and now we are clinging to peace despairingly, while prosperity has vanished. Have we not toiled through the night, and taken nothing? That sense of public discouragement reflects itself in our individual lives, weighs upon our spirits more than we know, and is making of us disappointed men and women. The indomitable patience I speak of is, believe me, a gift which we all need, or shall need before long.

Don't let us imagine that patience means a tame acceptance of the inevitable, sitting down with folded hands and hoping that somehow better times will turn up. It means action, bestirring ourselves and making the best of things; doing God's will, not merely submitting to it. At thy word I will let down the net; we are to attempt what seems hopeless, what seems hopeless, when we know it is God's will, whether he has made it known to us through conscience, or through revelation, or through the outward circumstances of our lives. As long as we are sure that we are obeying him; that no pride of ours, no neglect, no timidity, no human respect, is preventing us from finding out what his will is.

We are disheartened, perhaps, over material things; times are less prosperous, and we have to make the best of an income smaller than the income we were accustomed to; some of us can find no work to do, and feel the pinch of poverty nearer to the bone. Some of us are disheartened over spiritual difficulties, temptations against which we have long fought, it seems unsuccessfully, or dryness in prayer, or perpetually falling short of the standard we had set before ourselves. Some of us are disappointed over favours denied to us in prayer; all the harder to endure because those prayers were not selfishly offered, but for the needs of others; there is a son who is turning out badly, there is a friend's conversion we have long hoped for, there is an invalid for whose sufferings we asked relief. The temptation (in any case) is to throw up our hands in despair; to tell ourselves that we have done enough, and that we shall be running our heads up against a brick wall if we try to persevere; we have toiled all the night, and have taken nothing; very well, we will toil no more. That is where we want to remember the great "but" of St. Peter's utterance, "but" at thy word I will let down the net. Casting all your care upon him, for he hath care of you; so St. Peter wrote when he was an old man, and in prison, and the Church for which he had laboured so hard was being assailed by bitter persecution; he had learned his lesson, that day by the Lake of Galilee, long ago.

A sermon published in *The Tablet*, 24 June 1939.  
Pastoral and Occasional Sermons, reprinted 2002, Ignatius Press