

Isaiah 6: 1-8 (9-13)

Psalm 138

I Corinthians 15: 1-11

St. Luke 5: 1-11

Epiphany V 2022.

“Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.” Luke 5: 10b

One of the many ways in which the Lord Jesus is masterful, is how he could use common examples and experiences, to draw people to God... Do we remember the story of Jesus Christ meeting the woman at the well (John 4)? Jesus begins by talking about water – after all, they are at a well outside the village – and then he uses water to introduce this broken woman to himself, the Messiah...

Let’s recall the parables and metaphors of the Lord Jesus: To a rural people he teaches the Parable of the Sower, to invite us to consider how we respond to him. We can consider the Parable of the Lost Sheep. The hungry on the hillside are invited to encounter the Bread of Life, Christ Jesus himself. The woman who cleans by her fireplace, the merchant who trades for the precious pearl of the kingdom, and so on, all begin with everyday experiences – and then point us to God through Jesus Christ...

In a culture in which so many are skeptical of the institution of the Church, and in whom so many long for the kingdom of God here among us, let’s consider how *we* can use everyday experiences to invite people into conversion and new life... I suspect we need to preach less, and to listen more. Bearing witness to the Good Shepherd can touch more people when we live in humble service and bless the broken, than all the clever arguments about scripture, tradition and doctrine... How can everyday life point us away from, or towards, the Living God?...

Today’s gospel reading is from Luke 5. Luke observes that, although this is relatively early in Christ’s ministry, the needs of the people are almost overwhelming! Jesus tries to get a few moments for himself, but people search for him and find him, and try to prevent him from leaving their community.... This is where today’s reading begins. The Lord Jesus is still in the north country, by the large lake best known as the Sea of Galilee. He asks some local fishermen to use one of their boats. Moving a short distance from the shoreline, the voice of Jesus booms across the water as he teaches the crowd. The crowd, waiting at the shoreline, is spell-bound...

Possibly Jesus has spoken to the fishermen before; we don’t know. Certainly they must have been intrigued by this young Rabbi, who speaks with such divine graciousness and assurance. This is not like the teaching of the Pharisees!...

Here comes another miraculous event: The Lord instructs Simon the fisherman to put out his nets to catch fish. Simon Peter didn't catch a single fish all the previous night, but when the nets are lowered into the water, they catch a great shoal of fish!... The nets are about to tear by the weight of the catch, and another small boat comes alongside to help land all the fish... Simon Peter is confronted by his own sinfulness. But Jesus turns to him – and I imagine Christ speaking with great love in his eyes – “Do not be afraid” (presumably, the fishermen were terrified) – “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people...” Without hesitation, Simon Peter and the others get up and follow the Lord Jesus...

Do we see how, once again, Jesus uses everyday experiences, to teach us how to live?... Christ invites the fishermen to *fish* – but in a new way, so as to draw people to the Messiah himself...

This story is from long ago. Like all the stories and letters and poetry in the Bible, though, it informs us today: Like Simon Peter, we are invited to get up, to leave our old lives behind, and to follow Christ. Part of the process of this calling, this vocation, is to “fish for people” – to provide opportunities for other people to respond to the good news of new life...

Now if you're anything like me, the challenge to follow Christ wherever he leads can be challenging enough. But part of that process of following Christ means to “fish for people” – and that can be even more puzzling or alarming! What does that look like today, and how can we do it? How can we fish for people?...

We might well have had the experience of screwing up our courage and actually saying something, or inviting, only to be rebuffed...

If we are feeling inadequate, it can be encouraging to realize that we are not alone... When Simon Peter himself saw the great catch of fish, and began to realize he was in the presence of the Messiah, Peter's response is, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.” Peter seems to have thought, “I am full of sin. I am inadequate. This is too big a task for me...” But Peter went on to a marvelous ministry, didn't he? On the Day of Pentecost, Peter preached a sermon in which literally thousands of people responded to the gospel...

Peter wasn't the only one to feel inadequate for the job. The first reading today is from Isaiah 6. The young prophet Isaiah has a vision, a kind of glimpse of heaven. He is aware of God's throne, God's presence, along with angels and all kinds of heavenly beings. They cry the words we offer in the eucharist, “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God of hosts...” Isaiah's immediate reaction is to see his own sinfulness and inadequacy:

“Woe is me, for I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips...” How can these lips speak God’s words, when I am so full of sin?... But then Isaiah has a powerful experience of being cleansed and forgiven by the Lord; next, Isaiah gets commissioned to his ministry of prophecy... Even great Isaiah felt inadequate for the task!...

(Incidentally, if there are any liturgical geeks out there, the Anglican Prayer Book used to have the Humble Access prayer “We do not presume to come...” right after we sang or said with the angels, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God of hosts...” Scripture informs our liturgy...)

It wasn’t just Isaiah who felt inadequate either... In today’s second reading, Paul recounts the core of the gospel – that Jesus Christ died, was buried, and then raised on the third day. Paul continues,

Then [the risen Jesus Christ] appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the Church of God...
(I Corinthians 15: 7-9)

Paul knew he was called to proclaim and to bear witness to the gospel. Yet St. Paul also had a strong sense of his own inadequacy, except for the grace of God... The Bible itself bears witness that (sure), Paul sometimes flubbed it. But on the whole, St. Paul had an amazing ministry, helping people encounter Christ, and establishing local churches...

To take one of many examples from Church history, the Reverend John Keble ministered as a humble country cleric in the early 1800's, but he and his friends rose up to challenge facts, when the Church felt she was beholden to the State. They exercised tremendous ministries among the poor of east London, and beautiful worship. We don’t realize it, but parishes around the world, including St. Brice’s, have benefitted from Keble’s firm convictions, which informed the Oxford Movement... Yet, Keble was always aware of his inadequacies and on-going need for God...

So, we are called to follow Christ, and to fish for people. We’re called to dare to believe, and to live a life in response to Father’s gift in Jesus Christ, inspired by his Spirit... We might feel inadequate... When that happens, likely we are focusing too much on our own capacities, and not focusing enough on the living God... Do we believe that God knows what he is doing? As the hymn says, are we convinced that God is “pouring his grace on our lives day by day?...” It is *God* who draws people to himself. It happens that Almighty God himself uses little old you and me to introduce people to his glory...

So we are called to leave behind the nets of our old lives as we follow Christ. This may or may not mean moving to a new place or a new job. It will certainly include having a fresh attitude in how we live each day... As well as our ministries in the Church, we want to have the eyes of Christ, for opportunities to show love...

We are no longer on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. We see that the Lord continues to expect us to “fish for people” today... What does this look like in North Bay today? This is by no means an exhaustive list, but here are a few ways we can learn to fish for people today...

Before we *begin*, take time to pray, and always carry an attitude of love... Let’s not be in a hurry. Think long term...

First, live our lives with integrity. Christians never claim to be perfect. (The only perfect person is Christ himself.) But if we aren’t making any effort to greater personal holiness (with God’s help), what kind of example are we?...

Show hospitality – in the parish and the home. If we’ve been part of St. Brice’s for a long time, we likely think we’re a pretty friendly family. But we always need to be oriented *outward*, toward the guest or visitor, to make him or her feel at home...

As the current pandemic permits, consider how we might show hospitality in our neighbourhood... Do we know our closest neighbours? How would *we* like to be treated? “Do to others as you would have them do for you,” is Christ’s Golden Rule...

Invite: This is stepping up a notch, because it means actually talking with someone! Invite them to a Sunday morning – and be sure to be here too. If in prayer you figure the other person isn’t ready for a Sunday morning visit, invite them to a dinner or some other event at St. Brice’s...

Social outreach: According to our skills and gifts, do something to make a positive difference in the world... These are all ways to bear witness, to help fish for people...

Tell your story: People who may never open a Bible can be interested to learn why you follow Christ. It’s also a safe way for them to learn more about the faith... If you’re wondering whether to say less or more, always say less! Be brief...

Try to answer genuine questions. If someone wants a debate as an intellectual game, or if they’re drunk or high, don’t bother wasting everyone’s time... But if someone has a genuine question, try to answer it – or ask me or someone else, and then get back to the inquirer...

Offer to come alongside... Be present. Be a companion or a friend – especially to those who are hurting. For example, we’re losing the community skills, for example, how to help people how to mourn when there’s a death. Who can drop off a casserole, or offer a hug?...

Wonder of wonders, sometimes we come across someone who is just ready to commit themselves to Christ. For some people it’s a longer process; for others, “now is the hour.” With sensitivity, we can say something like this: “I believe God loves us both. Would you like to say a prayer with me, to be part of this faith journey?” If the other person says, “No,” then respect their choice. (*Later*, you can pray for them, for another moment.) But sometimes, you’ll get a “Yes.” Don’t fall over backwards, or doubt the person. (“You didn’t really mean that, did you?” No, no! If they want to come to Christ, support them!...)

What might a prayer be like, to help someone on a new chapter of their walk with the Lord?... I’m just a simple old preacher, but my parents taught me manners when I was a little boy. I can remember – Thank you; I’m sorry, and Please. Thank you; I’m sorry; and Please. For example, repeating a phrase at a time, we might pray,

“Dear Lord Jesus,
Thank you that you love me.
Thank you for forgiving all my wrongs...

I’m sincerely sorry for all the times I’ve hurt you or others...

Please, fill every corner of my heart and life...
Amen.

The other person already trusts you. Be trust-worthy. Invite them to be part of a local church – it’s unlikely they’ll survive and grow on their own. If they aren’t baptized (or don’t know), encourage them. Keep loving them, and praying for them...

Not all of us are present at the exact moment of a birth other than our own. Not all of us have the privilege of being present at the exact moment someone dies. Not all of us are present right at the time when someone consciously chooses to respond to Christ... But if we ever have that privilege – it’s the greatest gift we’ll ever receive, helping others this way...

One last point: Keep oneself close to God and one another: While fishing for others, don’t neglect one’s own spiritual walk! Keep in Christian fellowship. Receive the sacraments. Hear the word of God read and preached. Don’t neglect daily devotions...

Let's pray...

Dear God help us to follow you each day
 help us to fish for people as the apostles did so long ago.

Before we begin, prayer, and an attitude of love.

Think long term.

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Manners

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