

Luke 5:1-11

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Glory to Jesus Christ!

In today's Gospel reading we heard the miraculous story of how the Lord called His first disciples. The event took place on the Lake of Gennesaret, also called the Sea of Galilee, where the brothers Peter and Andrew, and James and John, were fishermen.

We heard how the Lord came to Peter and asked him to put his boat out a little from the land so that He could teach the crowds. And then afterwards the Lord told Peter to launch out into the deep and put down his nets for a catch. To this Peter responded that they had worked all night and caught nothing but nevertheless he would do what the Lord asked.

This is an important point in the narrative, so let us think for a moment about this.

Suppose we were the Apostle Peter and had worked all night trying to catch some fish to make a living, and we caught absolutely nothing, not even enough to feed ourselves. Now suppose in the morning a man comes up to us and asks us to put our boats out into the water so he can teach the crowds. What would our response be?

Now suppose after the man taught the crowds, he told us to launch out into the deep and put our nets down for a catch. At this point, probably most of us, if not all of us, would say something like, "I'm sorry, I let you use my boat for your teaching, but you know nothing at all about fishing. We worked all night and caught nothing, we are taking the boat ashore."

But of course, this wasn't the response of the Peter. And it wasn't the response of Peter because Peter was on the boat listening to the Lord's teaching, and not only listening to the Christ's teaching but he was also moved by it – he began to believe in the Lord. Peter was undergoing what we call a conversion experience.

A conversion experience leads a person from thinking one way to thinking another, from acting one way to acting another, from living one way to living another.

When Peter listened to the Lord by taking the boat out into the deep, and lowering the nets for a catch, he was no doubt wondering what the result would be, he was no doubt wondering whether or not he should have listened to Christ or whether he should have listened to his own thoughts which told him that they would catch no fish that day.

But of course what happened? The catch of fish was so large that they could not bring it up without breaking their nets. And even when they had called the others for help, the catch was still too large and their boats began to sink.

Then Peter continues the dialogue with the Lord, saying, “Depart from me, O Lord, for I am a sinful man!” And what does Christ say but, “Do not be afraid. From now on you will catch men.” And as the Scriptures record, “So when they brought their boats to the land, they forsook all and followed Him.”

Here in these last few lines of the narrative do we see what the whole event was all about, we see the purpose of the miracle. For Christ did not come to the Sea of Galilee to catch fish that day, rather He came to catch men. And He came to catch men, who would themselves also catch more men. Christ came, as we sing in the Troparion of Pentecost, to draw the whole world into His net.

In the first centuries after Pentecost, before the followers of Christ were able to practice their faith within the legal confines of the Roman empire, the Church often met in secret, in the catacombs. We know this, not only from written descriptions of their liturgical practices, hymnology, and sacramental worship but also from the iconographic symbols and depictions found on the walls of the underground caves and tombs where they gathered.

One of the most widespread of these iconographic symbols was the fish. The fish was a symbol of Christianity for a couple of reasons. First, the 6 letters of the Greek word for fish, signify the first letters of each word of the phrase, “Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior.” And second, the fish is an image chosen by Christ Himself.

The Lord foretold the conversion of the world to faith in Him through the miracle He performed on the Sea of Galilee. The imagery is clear: Christ is the captain of the ship, the ship is the Church, the fishing nets are the teachings and commandments of Christ, the Apostles are the fisherman, and the chosen people of God are the fish.

In the early Church, theology was expressed not only in writing but also through images and symbols, just as it is today. And in our contemporary times, the fish is often seen not only in churches but also on Christian bumper-stickers, magnets, and t-shirts. Yet how little do we know about the theological dimension of the fish as a Christian symbol.

We have seen how from the earliest days of the Church, the fish represented both Jesus Christ and His followers. We are certainly familiar with how the Old Testament image of Noah’s ark came to represent the New Testament Church – in the Old Testament all types of animals were ushered into the ark so that they would be saved from the flood, and in the New Testament, all types of men, Jews and Greeks, men and women, rich and poor, are welcomed into the Church of Christ, to be saved from sin, the devil, and death.

But one thing about the imagery of the fish which at first glance doesn’t seem to make sense is that when a fish is taken out of water it dies. If the Church is the ark of salvation, why was the fish chosen to represent the Savior and those who are being saved? Why not any other animal which would not die when it was taken out of water?

Of course, the answer here is simple, if we consider the nature of salvation, how Christ has overcome death by death, how He has given life through the Cross, and how we can

ourselves can acquire this life through denying ourselves, taking up our own crosses, and being crucified with Him.

Just last week in the Gospel we heard the Lord say “whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the Gospel’s will save it” and “whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow Me.”

The early Church understood this message very clearly, and for this reason chose the fish as one of the foremost symbols of Her faith. The faithful understood that becoming a Christian, meant being crucified with Christ, crucified to the world and its lusts, dying a once-and-for-all death to sin and corruption, and being resurrected into newness of life; into a new mode of being where one’s thoughts, words, and actions, and everything one lived for was based upon a radically new life in Christ.

The early Christians knew so well, what we often forget today, that we can partake of newness of life in Christ, of Resurrectional life, only to the extent that we have died to our old selves and the ways of the fallen world.

When the Apostle Peter heard the Lord’s teaching and saw the miraculous draw of fish, he knew that his life would never be the same. He knew that the Lord had caught him into His divine net.

To be sure, the Apostle Peter didn’t immediately die to himself and the ways of the world. We know of how he would later forbid the Lord from going to His voluntary Passion and Death on the Cross. We know how he later denied the Lord three times only to go out and weep bitterly. And in these things the Apostle Peter floundered like a fish out of water, a fish which was dying to the ways of the world but had not fully expired – he had not made that final radical break.

Yet we also know that once the Apostle Peter received the baptism of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost he died completely to the old man and was resurrected, not only as a new man, but now also a fisher of men, as his Lord had once foretold.

What can we learn from all of this, brothers and sisters? Many things.

We can learn that being caught in Christ’s divine net, means dying to our old selves and to the fallen world – a death that is of necessity painful.

We can learn that though at times we find ourselves gasping like the Apostle Peter, as a fish wanting to be put back into the sea of this world, and at other times, we may even deny Christ as he did, though it be only in the doubts of our hearts, no matter what happens, Christ will receive our repentance, take us back and draw us up out of the unclean waters of sinful living with the net of His divine teaching.

And through this personal knowledge, this personal experience, of being caught in the net of Christ’s teaching, and taken on board the ship of His Church, where we die to the

ways of the fallen world and live to newness of life, we will ourselves be transformed from fish into fishermen, we will fully understand the art of spiritual fishing.

The Fathers say very clearly, that we cannot give to others what we ourselves do not yet have. The Apostle Peter could not become a fisher of men, until he himself was first caught into Christ's net and died to the ways of the world. The Apostle Paul could not preach Christ crucified and lead people to newness of life in Him, until he himself could say that he was crucified with Christ and it was no longer he who lived but Christ who lived within him.

Brothers and sisters, the same holds true for us. We exist here as a mission, a mission whose goal is to bring people to newness of life in Christ through His Church. Let us follow the path laid before us, the path of the Cross, the path which the Apostles and Christians of all ages followed, the only path which leads to life, the only path which can transform us from fish into fishers of men.

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