

The 5th Sunday after Epiphany
February 7, 2019
St. Paul's Cathedral, London, ON
The Reverend Ruth M. Ferrier

Bless thou, the words of my lips and the meditations of our hearts that they may be of profit to us and acceptable to thee, Oh Lord our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Nobody is on top of the world every day.

Everyone has ups and downs.

Sometimes the world is sweet and sometimes it is sour.

Sometimes life moves along briskly,

we accomplish what we set out to do and we meet our personal goals.

And sometimes things get stuck.

We look failure in the face day after day.

We don't know how to get out of what we don't know how we got into.

Life comes to a halt.

Today's gospel reading is about three discouraged men -
four actually if you count Andrew - Simon Peter's brother,
who appears in other accounts of this story.

They were fishermen - not recreational fishermen,

but workers whose families went hungry if there was no catch.

Jesus had met them before - when they were associated with John the Baptist -
in fact he had been to Simon Peter's house and cured his mother-in-law
of a high fever.

It was a hard day's night for the four fishers.

They had fished all night and caught nothing. Now it was morning,
the morning after a night of failure, and the men were washing their nets
so they'd be ready for the next night's work.

There was a crowd on the beach near where they were working.

A big crowd. They were listening to Jesus - pressing in upon him.

Jesus is in the water - out away from the crowd.

Suddenly Jesus steps into Simon's boat.

"Put out a little way from shore", he asks Peter, and Peter does.

**From the boat Jesus continues to teach the crowds.
Finally he is done. The crowd goes home.**

**Jesus then turns to Simon. “Put out into the deep water”, he tells him,
“And let your nets down for a catch.”**

**It was really quite audacious for Jesus, a landsman,
to tell a professional fisherman how to do his business.
Very audacious - and Peter answers Jesus immediately by explaining the
facts of life to him.**

**“It won’t do any good,” he says, “We have worked all night -
and have caught nothing. There is no point to it.”**

Have you ever been there?

You do your best. You work hard. And the results are zero.

An important relationship goes sour and there is nothing you can do.

You watch a marriage dissolve and you can’t save it.

A project you have worked upon just will not pan out.

The harder you try - the less you produce.

**Have you ever been in the place where all your wisdom tells you
- just give up?**

**And the last thing you need to hear when you are in this position
are the words “try harder.”.**

Peter and Andrew, James and John - they were not stupid men.

**They knew the lake, the ledges where the fish congregated,
the kind of weather you had to have to bring in a good catch.**

Their families had been working the lake for generations.

They knew the time to fish - and where to fish -

and they had gone fishing - at the right time -

and at the right place - and had come up empty.

**“Try over there”, Jesus says. “Over there in the deep water -
let your nets down for a catch.”**

**“Master, we have worked all night long”, Peter replies,
“We have done everything we should have done,
everything we were taught to do by our fathers and their fathers
before them, but we have caught nothing...yet - if you say so -
I will let down the nets.”**

Why Simon agrees to row out into the deeper water - we do not know.

**Perhaps he did so because he was learning to trust Jesus -
perhaps he did it to humour him -
perhaps it was because of something in Jesus’ tone of voice.
Whatever the reason, Peter agrees to do what Jesus asks of him.**

**Your know the story from here - They threw the nets out from
Simon’s boat and engulfed such a great shoal of fish
that the nets began to break. Indeed they caught so many fish
that when John and James came alongside and helped load the boats -
the boats began to sink.**

**It was an amazing catch. A catch made in deep water.
A catch taken where there should have been no catch.
A catch taken at a time of day when there should have been no catch.**

**Today is the day when many preachers would talk to you about how
we are called to be soul catchers -
How like Simon Peter and Andrew and James and John
we are called to leave everything behind,
all our ordinary concerns and worries and frets and cares
and focus on winning people for God. And that is a good message.**

But instead of focusing on that message, I want you to look today at what the whole episode might

suggest about how we live our lives.

I want you to remember something today.

I want you to remember what Simon Peter said to Jesus at the first when he said “Master, we’ve worked hard all night and haven’t caught anything.”

What Simon said to Jesus in effect was:

- I know my business,**
- We tried it**
- We worked all night and nothing happened, so what’s the point.**

Undoubted, my friends, we, like Peter, do know our business.

But sometimes we know it too well.

We know our child is not educated enough or old enough to do a particular job or to enjoy a particular responsibility,

Or that our brother is too busy to ask for a favour,

Or that our neighbour doesn’t care to help,

Or that we ourselves aren’t talented enough to do what everyone is asking us to.

We know these things about ourselves and about others -

and what happens? We feel frustrated. We feel alone.

We feel inadequate. We believe that what is being asked of us

- be it as individuals or as part of a group,

will not pan out - and we don’t want to try again -

we don’t want to risk one more disappointment -

one more failure.

There are some people, some of them might be here today,

whose lives are miserable because for years they have refused

to risk such failure - such disappointment.

**They have resources, but do not use them,
skills, but do not develop them,
dreams, but do not follow them,
gifts, but do not share them.**

**They know what is what - they know their business
and they are not about to be instructed in it by anyone else.**

**They know who they are - and who others are -
and what the situation is - and they are locked in by that knowledge,
afraid to risk - afraid to reach out - afraid to go beyond the familiar,
because - in the end they know how things will pan out,
they know that there is no point to doing what is being asked of them,
that there is no point going beyond the place where fish are
normally caught - because if in the normal places there is nothing,
then how much less will there be in the places where fish
are almost never caught.**

Put out into the deep water - and let down your nets.

**Well - that's all very fine Jesus
- but we tried our best all night
- we tried it and it didn't work.
But because you say so, I will do as you have asked.**

**A young woman by the name of Peggy suggested to a church council
that they start a social club - one that could meet one Friday a month
for special events like bowling, rotation dinners, card parties,
tobogganing, theatre, and so forth.**

Guess what the Council said?

Come on - make a guess.

‘WE TRIED IT BEFORE - AND IT DIDN'T WORK.’

And they were right. They had tried it.

**They had done their best several times in recent years and it didn't work.
Nobody was interested. Nobody came.**

**But - the Council continued - if Peggy wanted to try again -
that was up to her - she had their blessing.
But please, they added, don't be disappointed if nothing happens.**

**That church had - on an average Sunday in those days,
about 85 people in it. Forty were people who were approaching or
past pensionable age, and thirty were children.**

**The first meeting of the Social Club had ten people attend it.
The second had sixteen. The third had over twenty.
All people between eighteen and forty.
It continued that way for some years. Everyone had a great
time together and because of that time together many other lives
in the community were touched.
Everyone became more alive - more confident - more united.
Church attendance rose in part due to the success of the group.**

**You know that there is truth in the old proverb that the family
that plays together stays together.
Put out into the deep waters and let down your nets for a catch.
What's the point?
The point is this: Sometimes we need to be stimulated by someone who lives outside our frame of
reference.**

**Sometimes we need to listen to another point of view.
Sometimes we need to risk one more failure,
to go and do what our common sense tells us cannot be done
and to try what we know will not work.
Sometimes we just need to head out into the deep waters
and let down our nets for no better reason
than Jesus has asked us to do so.**

Jesus did not come simply to make each one of us into some kind of metaphorical fishermen - going out to catch souls with a line of faith so that they could be displayed in some heavenly trophy case.

He came so that each one of us might have an abundant life, a full and rich life, a life in which we know and experience and share the love of God - a love which conquers the sting of death, and ensures that in the end our labours are not in vain, no matter how many days our nets may come up empty.

**To achieve that life - we have to do one thing -
We have to recognize that our knowledge and our experience is not equal to that of God's.**

We have to recognize that God's ways are indeed superior to our own, that his wisdom is greater, his timing better, and his counsel more life-giving than our own.

Today we have heard Isaiah and Simon Peter and Paul each acknowledge in their own ways that God is greater than they and that they are in need of God's grace and God's love. So too we must acknowledge our need - our need and God's ability and desire to meet that need.

Our nets may come up empty for many days in a row, but if we are open to God

- if we are willing to listen and to try the new things he suggest**
- if we are willing to venture out to the deep water**
- or simply if we are willing, because he asks us, to do over again some of the things we have tried before and given up on, our nets will in the end be filled, and filled so abundantly that our very nets will threaten to break**

and our boats begin to sink.

Each of today's three readings states God is able to make our nets overflow - even though we are sinful, even though we have failed before, and God is able to bring good news to the world through our labour - even though we may come late to the scene, - even though we may have sought to destroy rather than build up the body of Christ in former times.

God is able - and willing to help us -

God is able - and God calls us to share that message, the message that through listening to him and following him, there comes an abundance from where before there was nothing.

“But by the grace of God I am what I am”, Paul writes, “and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them - yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.”

God's grace makes all things new - it makes us who we are supposed to be.

Head the instructions that God gives to you here in the scriptures and here - in your hearts - and all will be better than you can imagine, for as you venture out into the deep waters, and labour hard to let down and bring up your nets you will discover the fullness of life - a life in which God is with you to accomplish his will.

Praise be to God, now and forever. Amen.