

An Encounter With Christ
5th Sunday after Trinity
(From the Gospel: St. Luke v. 1 ff.)

1 And it came to pass , that, as the people pressed upon him to hear the word of God , he stood by the lake of Gennesaret, 2 And saw two ships standing by the lake: but the fishermen were gone out of them, and were washing their nets. 3 And he entered into one of the ships, which was Simon's, and prayed him that he would thrust out a little from the land. And he sat down , and taught the people out of the ship. 4 Now when he had left speaking , he said unto Simon, Launch out into the deep, and let down your nets for a draught. 5 And Simon answering said unto him, Master, we have toiled all the night, and have taken nothing: nevertheless at thy word I will let down the net. 6 And when they had this done , they inclosed a great multitude of fishes: and their net brake . 7 And they beckoned unto their partners, which were in the other ship, that they should come and help them. And they came , and filled both the ships, so that they began to sink . 8 When Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying , Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord. 9 For he was astonished , and all that were with him, at the draught of the fishes which they had taken : 10 And so was also James, and John, the sons of Zebedee, which were partners with Simon. And Jesus said unto Simon, Fear not; from henceforth thou shalt catch men. 11 And when they had brought their ships to land, they forsook all, and followed him.

Today's wonderful Gospel provides us with a graphic opportunity to see exactly how God works. In each circumstance in this story, as the scene unfolds, we are permitted to observe both the actions of God, and the reactions of men. Because this account is a portion of God's Word, and *all scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness* (2 Tim. 3:16), we are free to draw inferences from it for all of life. What precious secrets about our God --and about ourselves-- can we distill from this famous Gospel tale?

The scene is from the middle stage of Jesus' ministry, what some commentators call the "Year of Popularity" (bounded by the "Year of Inauguration", the first year, and the "Year of Opposition", the third year). And so people are *pressing upon him* (the word in the Greek implies with physical force and urgency) to hear Him. Finding it impossible to teach sensibly and carefully under such circumstances, He makes use of what is at hand.

Already, we begin to learn something about the ways of God. There are no coincidences with Him. Again, He makes use of what is simply nearby. Why? Because He was the One who had ordained the very details of the circumstance in the first place. It didn't just "happen" that this teaching session occurred at the lakefront, and that certain boats and certain fisherman would be at work at that very time and place. On the other hand, these are very ordinary day-to-day factors: a day of work, the instruments of employment, the mundane occupation of fishing for a living. This is no electrically lit amphitheater surrounded by cameras and lights. No rehearsal of the events that are about to transpire has occurred. But God, being God, reaches out to people in their very circumstances and draws them lovingly and wonderfully into something so high and unexpected that they will never recover from the encounter.

The Lord merely requested that a boat be made available to Him to teach out of, so He could address without hindrance the crowds who *pressed upon him*. We are free to draw additional conclusions. Jesus does not commandeer the boat: "Give it to me; I am the Lord, or else I'll...!". He *prays* Simon Peter --He *asks* Him, wonder of wonders-- to allow the use of the boat for an alternate purpose. It is, however, in its way, a distinct interruption of the work day. The fishermen had been *washing their nets*, a very necessary part of their daily routine, which the Teacher is now setting aside by His request. Peter, in deference to Christ, cooperates apparently without resistance.

Does God have a right to make such gracious intrusions into the world of men? The answer, of course, is obvious. But the result of such intrusions, their consequence, depends upon how men receive them! Would the Pharisees and other Jewish leaders have done the same? And really, do men have a right, as it were, to count God's arrival on the scene, in His own time, at His own pace, and under circumstances of His choosing, as an intrusion? This question should answer itself, as well.

Following Christ's sermon to the assembled crowd --and we can only guess what marvelous truths He offered them-- He focuses in upon one sole man, the very one who had out of humility and goodness of heart permitted this divine alteration of his normal workday. Jesus addresses Simon Peter, who will continue to play a principal role both in Christ's ministry and in the founding of the Church a few short years hence: *Launch out into the deep, and let down your nets for a draught*. Peter's response is highly instructive (and remember, *instruction* is one of the main purposes of Scripture): *Master, we have toiled all the night, and have taken nothing: nevertheless at thy word I will let down the net*. "We have done everything that is humanly possible to get a catch of fish. We have used the minds and bodies given us, combined with well-maintained equipment, to the very best of our ability, and have yet *taken nothing*". But it is the words *nevertheless at thy word I will let down the net* that are most remarkable. Do they not remind you of other biblical declarations of faith?:

Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name Jesus. ... Then Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I do not know a man?" And the angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you... Then Mary said, "Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her. (From Luke 1)

...at thy word I will... says Peter. *Let it be to me according to your word*, says Mary. These are surely the dearest words to God's ears among all the things that men may ever say. These statements mean, "I will suspend my logic, my pride, my fear, my certainty of the outcome, Lord, in order to respect Your wishes. I am risking all on this decision to give up my preconceived no-

tions of cause and effect and to trust You completely.” Whatever Peter had come to know of Jesus to that point had urged Peter to bank all upon Him.

The result of this simple, yet very real and perhaps even painfully difficult act of will --because all such concessions to God are never easy-- was a miracle of far greater proportion than Peter could ever have imagined. What transpires here seems almost comical. One can even imagine a slight smile on Jesus’ face as He watches the consequences unfold of the obedience of Peter and his friends to Jesus’ word. They are deluged with fish, and simply from *letting down their nets for a draught*. We wonder what their faces look like in the midst of the turmoil. Is it the anguished face of sweat and toil? Is it shocked surprise? Is there any joy and wonder apparent, as well? Simon Peter would never have guessed that his simple assent to Christ’s request would possibly yield such an abundant result. So great is the bounty that aid must be called for, so large is the load that there is actual danger of the boats sinking. Imagine the mix of emotions that erupted in this scene.

One emotion has not yet been mentioned, however. Perhaps it is the most surprising consequence of what has just taken place. We see it in all the gathered fisherman, but most graphically in Simon:

When Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying , Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord. For he was astonished , and all that were with him, at the draught of the fishes which they had taken : And so was also James, and John, the sons of Zebedee, which were partners with Simon.

Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord. This seems one of the most stunning statements made by any man to God anywhere in Scripture. How often do such words cross the lips of men? One might say: very, very rarely. And yet it is left to a man of humble occupation to utter words that should have been spoken by the entire Jewish nation, especially its learned and knowledgeable leaders, concerning the many works of Christ with which they were wholly familiar. Why would a miracle of this nature thus affect a soul? Why *should* it always be so? But shouldn’t the beauty of the day, of the night, of the light of love in the eyes of those closest to us, of one more given day of life, of any kindness shown us, whether small or great, of any sign whatsoever of the hand of God, produce this or a similar reaction within us? One of repentant self-examination, of humbling ourselves before a God before whom we are deserving of far different treatment than mercy and forgiveness? Should it not, then, be an attitude of life? Peter commands Jesus to *depart from him* because He realizes that a God who performs miracles --kindnesses of any degree or sort-- is also that very One who can see down into the very depths of our souls, wherein dwells nothing but *sin*. “Get away from me! I am not worthy of Your presence next to me. I will contaminate You. Go quickly, lest You see me for what I am.” It is only right that exposure to the holiness and greatness of God should produce such results in men... *all* men.

But what are Jesus' answering words to Peter's panic? *Fear not; from henceforth thou shalt catch men.* In eight short words, Jesus absolves Peter, and immediately promotes him to a new vocation. Peter has brought himself very rapidly along a very unexpected road in a very short amount of time: he moves from toiling, frustrated fisherman, to temporary assistant to the needs of an unknown Teacher, to part owner in a huge catch of fish, to a permanent career change as a disciple of Jesus Christ whose life will be devoted to *catching men.*

It is no wonder that the last line of today's text reads: *And when they had brought their ships to land, they forsook all, and followed him.* To meet Christ, to really *meet* Him, can never be done on one's own terms. Christ chooses the place, the time, the mode, and the method. He prepares the meeting in advance, and anticipates the outcome long before it has happened. True, men may reject Him. They may deny the reality of what they've seen Him do. They may treat Him casually or carelessly. Men may do anything *they* want to do. But to those who will cooperate with Him, who will endure the experience that is inevitably the consequence of what *we* are meeting what *He* is, there remains that highest of human destinies: *following Him.*

And there is plenty of good company there: *they* "forsook all and followed him".

Will we join them?

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.