

3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)

January 21, 2024

“Jesus said to them, ‘Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men.’”

Fishers of men

I don't know about you, but that simple phrase from Sacred Scripture really grabs me nearly every time I hear it. Fishers of men. It just sounds so important, so meaningful, so profound. Fishers of men. Three little words. But are they just that - words? Is this short phrase just a kind of clever quip from the mouth of Jesus that happened to get the attention of a couple of fisherman two thousand years ago? Or are these words much more than that? And if so, what exactly do they mean for us in this time and place?

Those are a lot of questions. Let's unpack it a little bit and see what being a “fisher of men” might look like in this day and age.

First of all, fishermen often have to continually venture out to different areas in search of fish. They can't simply wait for the fish to come to them. They have to be on the move day after day, night after night, seeking and searching and pursuing. They can't just remain stationary and expect much to happen. And so, as disciples, maybe we need to do the same. Maybe we need not play it safe or remain in our comfort zones, but rather continually reach out to those on the margins, to those who are different from us, those who aren't part of our little corner of the world. A true “fisher of men” is someone who looks for opportunities to share the Gospel with others, share what faith means to him or her, share this great gift not with a few, but with many.

Secondly, fishermen often have to use just the right bait. If they use the wrong bait, they might find themselves catching nothing. But with the right bait, fishermen can sometimes catch fish as fast as they can throw

their line or net into the water. And so, as disciples, as spreaders or preachers of the Gospel, as “fishers of men”, what bait do we use? What do we use to draw people in, to attract them to the Lord, to ourselves, and to our message? Some of us, I’m sorry to say, can fall into the trap of using the “wrong” bait. Sometimes we can litter our religious talk with a whole bunch of “shoulds” and “musts” and “have tos”, as if we are on some sort of moral high ground looking down on all the sinners of the world. We frame our conversations with language that makes a life of faith something we better embrace OR ELSE, better get onboard with or God will punish us, better say “yes” to or else we are jeopardizing everything.

I don’t know about you, but that would never attract me to Jesus, would never attract me to such an understanding, would never make me want to be part of something that held that sort of message at its core. Rather, the bait that “works”, the bait that is the most faithful reflection of who we are as followers of Jesus is love and kindness and mercy and generosity. These are the things that will ultimately draw people in, make them want to be part of the family of faith. Fear doesn’t work. Fancy intellectual arguments almost never work. Narrow-mindedness or arrogance or self-righteousness absolutely never work. Love works. Always has. Always will, for God is love. And that’s the only bait we’ll ever need.

Thirdly, fishermen often catch their fish and bring them onto some sort of boat. For the Catholic Christian that boat is the Church, a kind of “ark” that keeps us safe as we journey on the stormy waters of life. The Church is a lifeline, a refuge, a place of forgiveness and welcome and community and love. Do we talk about the Church in those terms? Do we try to affirm all that is good and beautiful in the Church and of the Church? Do we describe our lives as Catholics as something we treasure, something we wouldn’t and couldn’t do without? Or do we fall into a kind of negativity and cynicism, constantly focusing on things we wish the Church would change, or focusing simply on the faults and failings and sins of Church leadership? Isn’t the Church so much more than that? When we are talking to those outside of the Church and even those within it, we need to

always be mindful to try to paint a fair and complete picture for people, not a false one, but not a one-sided one either.

Of course, I've saved for last the one aspect of fishing that fails as an analogy for the life of a disciple of Jesus. Obviously, when a fisherman catches a fish that usually means that is the end of the fish's life. And yet, as "fishers of men" nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, the exact opposite is true. We spread the Gospel, we share our faith, we strive to bring people to Jesus and to the boat that is the Church precisely so that they might have life - an abundant, meaningful, joyful life beyond their wildest imagination. When we are "caught" by God (or when we help others be "caught" through the actions of even sinful people such as you and me) we (and they) are actually set "free", liberated from the shackles of despair and disappointment and sin. And so we take Jesus' command seriously not in order to reel people in and restrain their lives, but to help God give them life, a newness of life that only He can give.

And so as we step out in faith to be "fishers of men" let's adopt a policy that is becoming more and more common. Let's use a "catch and release" philosophy, one in which we help God "catch" those who are adrift or struggling and then "release" them for a life of great joy, of great hope, of great meaning, of great love. In faith, we believe that is truly possible. And that's no fish story!

A Short Story

There is a story about a holy Rabbi. In the town where he lived, the houses of the rich stood in an isolated area so that they had to hire men to watch over their property at night. Late one evening as the Rabbi was coming home, he met a watchman walking up and down.

'For whom are you working?' the Rabbi asked.

The man told him and then inquired in his turn, 'and for whom are you working for, Rabbi?'

The words struck the Rabbi like a shaft. 'I am not working for anyone just now,' he barely managed to say. Then he walked up and down beside the

man for a long time. 'Will you be my servant?' he finally asked. 'I should like to,' the man replied, 'but what would be my duties?' 'To ask me that question every now and then,' said the Rabbi.

My dear people of God, this is a question each of us might ask every now and then: who or what am I working for?