

Launching into the Deep

Epiphany 5 - 7/2/10

Readings:

Luke 5: 1-11

Creator God, you have drawn us from deep within ourselves into your loving net of grace. Strengthen us to cast such a net of justice and mercy into the depths of this community and world that all might feel embraced by your realm. AMEN.

The disciples had been fishing all night. And as we all know night fishing is usually the most productive. But they had caught nothing. All their skill, all their experience had counted for nothing. Ever had one of those days? -Nothing goes right. Life can be tough!

Then along comes Jesus in the middle of the day, and tells them to launch into the deep and put their nets down. "Yeah, sure Jesus, whatever you say!" And Peter humours Jesus, probably wondering what a carpenter from Nazareth could possibly tell him about fishing. Mind you Peter would have remembered how Jesus had just cured his dear old mum - so he does as he is asked. Well we all know what happened next. Peter and his crew put down their nets and they come up full. So full that they have to call in another boat. So full that both boats are near to sinking.

What a great story! Great for preachers who want to encourage their congregation. Launch out into the deep, that all you need to do and everything will be OK. We will be rewarded beyond our expectations. And the passage should end at verse 7 where it says "They came and they filled both boats so that they both began to sink." That's all we need to hear. That's what'll happen if you follow Jesus. End of sermon.

But it's not the end of the passage. And you'll be relieved to hear that it's not the end of this sermon. Look at verse 8. Simon Peter has just been witness to God's extraordinary grace. And what does he do? He fall on his knees - and he tells Jesus to ... get lost! "Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man."

Now some commentators have suggested that this is Simon Peter's natural response to the greatness and holiness of God. When we see God working through Jesus the Christ it forces us to look at ourselves. To see ourselves as we really are, and of course most of us are not happy with what we see. Peter calls it sin. But in meeting the Christ, Peter is changed. In fact Luke signals that change by calling Simon, Peter, for the first time in his gospel. He becomes a new person.

Now this interpretation is probably quite correct. But I'd like to bring another perspective to Simon Peter's response. In verse 10, right after Peter has told Jesus to go away, Jesus tell Peter, "Do not be afraid." And how many times does Jesus tell his disciples not to be afraid in the Gospels? - When he strides out on water to them in the storm on Lake Galilee; during the last supper, when he appears to them all after the resurrection. Fear it would seem was

a constant companion for those early disciples. Launch out into the deep. We can see what Jesus can do, the miracle he can wrought. But - we are afraid.

We have fished all night on our own, and nothing has happened. We've caught nothing. Over the years we have seen our fishing dry up. Our numbers have dropped, we used to have two ministers, and where have all our children gone to? People no longer seem interested in church. Our congregation is ageing and we worry about our finances. Will the church survive?

But Jesus bids us to launch out into the deep and to put down our nets. And when we do that he assures us, "Do not be afraid, from now on you'll be catching people." Do not be afraid.

Fear of failure - lack of faith in God's transformative power keeps the church where it is. And just as importantly it keeps each of us where we are. Paddling about in the shallows. For I fear that individually and as a church that's all we are game for. As long as we can conduct business as usual - there's no need to change, individually or as a church.

But Jesus call us to launch forth into the deep. And like Peter we are afraid so we stay put.

As a social worker I've sat with people whose lives have been conducted in the shallows, for they have been fearful of what they would catch if they put their nets down in the murky depths of their being. But in company, with someone who cares, casting their nets deeply has always yielded a catch that has led to healing and wholeness. Similarly as a minister I have known congregations that have refused to sail into the deep waters to let down their nets. A congregation I once knew that was experiencing the ceiling literally falling in on them - I arrive one morning to find the porch ceiling on floor - refusing to look at a new way of being that would mean the selling of their property. They were afraid, so they stayed put and they grew frailer along with their building and of course no one came to their sinking boat for it was filled not with fish but with holes - holes created by fear.

I despair as I think back to that congregation I now wonder what we thought we were there for. To have a warm place to go to on a Sunday morning, to reminisce together about the good old days, or to just hear the nice stories of God that would keep our fears at bay. But this morning's gospel talks of making us all fishers of people and to do that you need to risk the deep. Risk it individually and as a church. In fact unless we start with ourselves and our relationship with God we will never be able to fish/to risk as a church.

After we were first married, Jenny and I attended a Baptist church in Sydney where they took this gospel passage seriously. This church was set up in a huge state Housing Commission area. It started out in a small commission cottage. Then they launched themselves into the deep. A congregation of less than fifty people, far from being wealthy, who dreamt a dream and chose to go into debt and build a multi-purpose Christian centre. Eventually they were able to provide their needy community access to a preschool centre, a youth worker, and a family counsellor. The water was getting very deep. But with the help of God and the Baptist Union of NSW, we launched into the deep and provided a major

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Christian presence in Mt. Druitt in the 1970's. God made us catchers of people, many of whom had never been in a church in their lives until then. What a vision. A vision that became a reality through the church's willingness to launch out into the deep.

So what about us at Pilgrim. Do we dream dreams? Do we have a vision for our future? How will we respond to Jesus' invitation to fish deeply? Are we willing to change?

At the start of another Pilgrim year my prayer is that we take seriously Christ invitation to become fishers of people in a world that seems to need to find a spiritual anchor. So let's not be afraid. Let us launch ourselves into the deep where our God has assured us that we will be transformed and in the transformation transform our world.

So let's sing a song of committal as we launch ourselves into the deep.

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