



3rd Sunday after Epiphany

Sermon by Revd Matthew Wright



21 January 2024

READINGS

Jonah 3:1-5,10; Psalm 62:5-12; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20

“Fishers of men”

Today’s Gospel sees the well-known story of the calling of Peter (Simon) and Andrew, his brother, and the sons of Zebedee, James and John, who were all fishermen. There is the clever play on words which Jesus uses to indicate that instead of being fishermen, they will now become “fishers of men”.

So fish and fishing have, from the outset, a deep connection with Christianity. Probably from the earliest time, the fish in fact became a symbol of Christianity. This was no doubt due in part to the earliest disciples being fishermen, but also because the Greek word ICHTHUS, meaning “fish” was used as an anagram for Christological titles. It stood for “Jesus-Christ-God’s-Son-Saviour”. In early centuries, clandestine Christians, in contexts of persecution, would sometimes surreptitiously draw the symbol of the fish on the ground to alert others to the fact that they were Christian.

Might there be any other reasons for the close association between the fledgling religion and fish or fishing?

Certainly, the sea of Galilee features prominently in Jesus’ ministry, and likely would have featured strongly in his life growing up, being about a day’s journey from Nazareth. Jesus also performs a number of miracles which, in some way, are connected to the sea of Galilee: from the multiplication of the fish and the loaves, to the miraculous catch, to walking on water, to the stilling of the storm, all of these memorable episodes are centred around the sea of Galilee.

From a theological point of view, in ancient religions, the sea often has negative connotations – it represents chaos, unruliness, and mythical creatures which have escaped the taming of man. Some of this thinking is reflected in the book of Job. It is also the thinking undergirding the first creation account in Genesis as well, probably, as Jesus walking on water and stilling the storm.

In many religions the sea is not only an unruly and chaotic place but even a source of evil. Archetypally speaking, I think much of this still holds true today. While many regard the ocean, from the perspective of the shoreline, as calming, the deep ocean is still a source of mystery and trepidation. It used to be said that we know more about outer space than we do about our own oceans, which gives us an indication of how unexplored they are.

It perhaps then is no coincidence that water, as an archetypal symbol or a primordial element, is central to the sacrament of baptism. In its original context, Christian baptism represented a form of ritual drowning (this is reflected in Paul's writings in Romans 6). So water, in the original context of Christian baptism, does represent new life but, in the first instance, death.

Our Old Testament reading for this week sees the culmination of Jonah's prophetic ministry in Nineveh. Not insignificantly, when Jesus is asked for a sign by his challengers, he replies that no sign will be given that generation except the sign of Jonah. And he goes on to liken Jonah's three-day sojourn in the belly of the fish to Jesus' descent to the dead for a period of three days.

Though it may seem an innocuous image, the fish is therefore latent with much meaningful and profound symbolism pertaining to the Christian journey. Perhaps, at the broadest level, it is a reminder of our close relationship to the sea or to the ocean. This might not be in literal terms but as a reference to that which is dark, dangerous, watery and mysterious, essentially all those things we often do our best to try avoid.

But in our Gospel reading Peter, Andrew, James and John, are already very familiar, at least in a more literal sense, with the watery places. Indeed, it is precisely their professions as fishermen that they are told to leave behind. This they do, but their professions were the very things which provided them (and possibly their families) with security and familiarity, and perhaps a sense of identity and purpose. Their so-called 'watery' places lay elsewhere completely outside of their familiar professions.

I once had a lecturer who likened the spiritual journey, perhaps the point at which we are awakened, to wading out into the breakers of the sea. There comes a certain point, at a certain depth, when one begins to float, and the ground disappears from beneath one's feet. At this point the choice is to subject oneself to the will of the ocean and the current or to retreat back to the safety of the shore. Undoubtedly, the first option is the more frightening of the two because it means we surrender our control and allow ourselves to be subject to a force far greater than ourselves. And yet it seems somehow that such a demand is made on us in the context of Christian discipleship. Will we heed the call to step out into the waters, or will we retreat to the safety of the shore where we are still firmly in control?

As we contemplate these things, may God's hand of guidance, blessing and protection remain upon you and those you love. Amen