

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday before Lent

When he had finished speaking he said to Simon “Put out into deep water and pay out your nets for a catch”

Luke 5.5

One of the first paintings I ever saw was hung in pride of place at the entrance hall of Plymouth Museum, one of the many museums of ‘civic pride’ up and down the country built by the Victorians. This Painting was of a large fishing boat stranded in wet sand, and spewing fish around it everywhere. The scene was serene and peaceful; bathed in the bright clear light of an early Spring morning. Trestle tables were laid out on the sand where fisherwomen were filleting the fish. The painting made you feel the water’s majesty, all glistening around you.

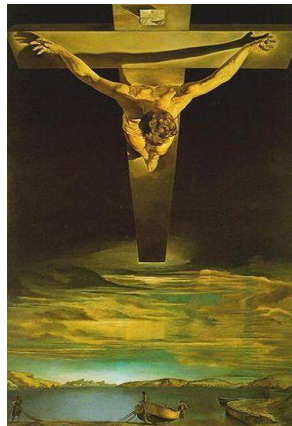


'A Fish Sale on a Cornish Beach'
Stanhope Forbes, 1883, (Plymouth Art Gallery)

Our Gospel writer Luke has often been depicted in religious art as a painter, with a palette in his hand and a painter's brush to paint pictures and ikons. It is not likely that he was in fact a painter; but there is ample evidence of his ability to 'paint' pictures using words. His words add depth, colour and lustre to his Gospel text. In today's Gospel reading he paints a picture for us using the background image of a crowd of people away on the shore and pressing in on one another, eager to see Jesus. And in the foreground is a large lake, from which Jesus addresses the people. Between background and foreground, between land and water, lies the boat where Jesus is. This is the place where the movement of the people, the teaching of Jesus, the putting out into the deep and the miraculous catch of fish is concentrated. Jesus' little boat is like one of those magnets we used to use at school which lies at the centre of a force-field of energy shown by an arc of iron filings. This particular energy, Luke tells us, is divine energy, the same energy 'which was God's from the beginning'. It is an energy which is essentially spiritual, though drawn from life. St Luke is getting us to read his narrative from this raised perspective, in which 'the teaching from the boat'; 'the putting out into deep water'; 'the filling of the boats to sinking point' and the

command to 'be not afraid' have a meaning which is not just about fishing! It provides for us a visual imagery through which a spiritual message is being spoken.

We are asked to read this scene some way behind Jesus and raised high so that we read this Gospel as it were from above; from the perspective of God himself. God, then, looks down and beholds what is happening. We see this in the paintings of Salvador Dali, and especially in his 1951 Painting *Jesus Christ of St John of the Cross*, where the crucifixion is seen from way above Christ's head (see over). We are asked to see what is happening from a new and thrilling perspective.



Salvador Dali 'Jesus Christ of St John of the Cross', 1953
Kelvingrove Art Gallery, Glasgow.

The message of the boat on the Sea of Galilee is about God and about us. It provides for a picture of the Christian calling in which we are being called to become ourselves from that place which lies both within and beyond our own wants. There is a William Blake drawing with a man looking up to the moon and a ladder which leads to it. The man looks up to the moon and cries "I want! I want!" If our lives are based solely on what we want, of 'asking for the moon', surely life succumbs to selfish materialism? Its spiritual counterpart is the one which begins to look out of from a self-centred, atomized kind of world and toward the needs of those around us. We reach out from our own little worlds to find others and so in turn find our true selves in them. This is a mystery. "Love is the difficult idea that someone other than myself is real" said Iris Murdoch. The 'putting out into the deep' suggested by Luke's Gospel Reading is living life not by the 'Me! Me!' principle but by discovering deep within ourselves the spiritual resources to become as Christ would have us become; turned toward the reality of the other, from a deeper awareness of the life around us and of the necessity always of love: God's love is as invisible arms that reach down into the deep to find what is there, and has always been there. He calls you in his Son Jesus Christ 'to put out into deep water' as he did in Galilee all those centuries ago. To pay out our nets into the waters both to trust in his provision and rejoice in his increase. This morning St Luke the Gospel writer has not only told us what this might mean. He has also painted it in our minds and hearts. Even though Peter fears this calling we must regard Christ's teaching as an essential part of what it is for us to become truly human.

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