

Trinity 5 2021 St Peter and all caught in the apostolic nets encounter the depths of the Beauty, Goodness, and Wisdom of God
1 Kings 19.19-21, 1 Peter 3.8-15, Luke 5.1-11
Pusey House, the Principal

***BE ye all of one mind, having compassion one of another, love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous; not rendering evil for evil, or railing for railing: but contrariwise blessing;
... Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.***

Today the preacher of divine love is not St John the Divine, ‘God is love and he who abides in love abides in God and God in him’, but rather the formerly impetuous and forward St Peter. St Peter preaches in two ways. In the Gospel, he preaches by his conversion, by his response to vision of divine goodness, power and love. The epistle, which calls us to love, is the over-flowing of St Peter’s transformation, the pouring out of what was first poured into him. It’s important to see that St Peter is not converted by a command, even the command to love. Rather, the life to which St Peter invites us, his call to love, flows from something else, and it’s to that something else which I suggest we turn.

We are coming to an important turning point in the journey we’ve been on these past weeks. We are arriving at the base camp. Looking up, where we may be dazzled by the beauty of divine super-abundance and goodness. But as we look up on those heights, perhaps we wonder if we can make it after all. Peter’s conversion is important, because it’s though which each of us must pass. We will not so much climb the mountain, as be lifted up on eagles wings: in the words of the prophet Isaiah: ‘But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.’ What changes for St Peter, what changes for us?

I’ve described the vision of divine love which has been put before us as relentless. God pursues us, the love of God comes down from heaven, the love of God draws near, reaches into the darkest places of the world, the darkest places of our hearts. Love pursues all the way to place of departed spirits – love descends into hell for us.

Love is relentless in a second way, in what it asks of us. The serious claim of divine love put before us in the parable of Lazarus and Dives, the poor man at the rich man’s gate. We saw that if we chose to reject the claims of love we chose hell for ourselves. That’s not an easy message. Three weeks ago, we heard the invitation to the great supper. Many of the invited guests did not come. Perhaps it wasn’t just that they were busy, but they were put off by the claims of love: *he that loveth not his brother abideth in death.... My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue, but in deed, and in truth.* But the divine Love was not put-off, even if the guests were. Christ told another parable, the parable which describes His own love, pursuing us, searching for us. He told the disciples about the shepherd he went in search of the lost sheep. He described Himself, the word of God who came down from heaven to rescue humanity gone astray and stumbling in the half-light. But can we bear to be pursued by love which is a consuming fire?

Last week OBL described this consuming fire: *Be ye therefore merciful as your father is merciful. condemn not, and ye shall not be condemned: forgive, and ye shall be forgiven.*

Oh dear, can we make this journey, is it really possible? In the end, this relentless call to love *is not* what converts St Peter, and it's unlikely that it will convert us. We find the key in the Gospel and the account of his conversion, his being lifted up on eagle's wings.

At the conclusion of the miracle of the miraculous catch, our Lord says to Simon Peter: ***Fear not, from henceforth thou shalt catch men.*** From henceforth, Peter and his apostolic partners will take men alive from the sea of this world. St Augustine's teacher St Ambrose is typical of the interpreters of the early Church:

'And well is it said that the Apostles use nets in their fishing, since they do not destroy those they catch, but save them, and draw them upwards from the depths to the light; bringing those who are wavering, from the knowledge of the lowest things to the knowledge of the highest.'

The way in which our Lord uses the catching of fish as a metaphor for the work of the Church led the earliest interpreters of the Bible to look for other clues in the account of the miracle and what the evangelists say about it.

What are the nets which the Apostles use? Ambrose writes:

'What are the nets of the Apostles which they are commanded to let down, if not the forms of words, and as it were certain profundities of speech, and the subtleties of discussion, which do not let go those that come to their nets?'

At first, our Lord uses St Peter's boat as a pulpit, as a way of teaching the people. Having left of speaking, he takes Simon back to the work which had been so fruitless the night before:

he said unto Simon, Launch out into the deep, and let down your nets for a draught. 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.

Having been on the journey into the divine love these past four weeks, perhaps we can hear Peter's lament all the more clearly:

Well, we've listened to the call to put on humility, and to love one another, and not just this year. We have been trying to follow Christ's teaching for some time. We've forgiven our friend, perhaps we've even managed to forgive our enemy. We've been given grace to see the beam in our own eye. What more could love ask? We've not only persevered to forgive the person who offends us or attacks us, we've tried to look at what is wrong with ourselves. We've confessed our sins, and prayed for mercy and forgiveness. And where has all this taken us? What has changed? The person who offends or attacked us doesn't seem to have changed very much. It's difficult to cherish one another, to see the good and best in one another, let alone in ourselves.

Worse still, perhaps we not sure how much we have changed. Maybe we see something of the same struggles now that we wrestled with years ago. And the more fully we have been open to the call to love one another over these past 4 weeks, the more acutely we may feel this dis-ease of being out of sync with divine wisdom and goodness. *Master, we have toiled all night, and have taken nothing.* St Peter words speak to us of the futility or difficulty of our efforts.

He said unto Simon, Launch out into the deep, and let down your nets for a draught. How can this direction possibly be a response to our needs and our hopes? Let's hear the words of St Ambrose again:

Accordingly, though He commanded the others to let down their nets, only to Peter was it said: Launch out into the deep, that is, into the deeps of preaching. For what is so deep as to look upon the depths of the riches of God, to know the Son of God?¹

In this view, the **deep** to which our Lord summons Peter, and to which he summons us, are the deep mysteries of knowledge of divine things. St Augustine says something similar—our Lord begins by teaching near the shore, near what the people can understand. It is not possible to bring us ‘suddenly from things earthly to the profundities [to the depths] of the mysteries’.² According to St Ambrose and Augustine, when our lord instructs Simon to launch out into the deep, he is instructing him, and us, not to be content with just a surface knowledge, but to do deeper.

Oh dear, can we follow along with this? It's one thing to unpack the metaphor of catching sons and daughters of God alive in the nets with apostolic preaching, but this seems to take it too far—to stretch not the nets only, but the text also, to the breaking point.

Well, maybe, but maybe not, at least there may be more hear in what St Ambrose says than meets the eye. What changed for St Peter? What did he see? Or, in other words, what is the connection between the miraculous catch and what he does next?

They had worked all night – they worked at brink of human powers, they did all that knowledge and experience showed them, and caught nothing. Then, at our Lord's command, they left down the net, and ***‘enclosed a great multitude of fishes’***. So many fish, in fact, that their net brake.

¹ ‘Accordingly, though He commanded the others to let down their nets, only to Peter was it said: Launch out into the deep, that is, into the deeps of preaching. For what is so deep as to look upon the depths of the riches of God, to know the Son of God, and to take upon oneself to declare the Divine Generation; which though the human mind cannot with the full power of reason comprehend, yet the fulness of faith can. For though I may not know how He was born; yet I may not not know that He is born. I know not the line of His generation, but I confess the Author of His Birth. We were not present when the Son of God was born of the Father; but we were present when He was called Son of God by the Father. If we cannot believe in God, in whom shall we believe? For all that we believe, we either believe by sight or by hearing. Sight is often deceived; hearing is based on faith. Is the character of one who lays claim to another searched into? If good men should speak, we would think it a crime not to believe them. God lays claim to the Son; the Son confirms this; the sun hiding its light confesses it; the trembling earth bears witness to it. Into this deep of investigation the Church is led by Peter; that it may see here the Son of God rising from the dead, and there the Holy Spirit pouring forth.’ Ambrose, on the Gospel, see Toal, Sunday Sermons of the Fathers, vol 3, p. 221,

or <http://www.lectionarycentral.com/trinity05/Ambrose.html>

² Augustine in the Catena Aurea, see Toal, Sunday Sermons of the Fathers, vol 3, p. 216

When Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord

St Peter sees something more than a great act of power. He confesses his sin, he confesses his insufficiency, the poverty of his goodness, his ignorance. The miracle is a sign, it reveals what is normally hidden, what is there in the depths.³ Peter sees something of the wonderful goodness, the beauty, the wisdom, the purity, of the Son of God. He sees through the veil of flesh, he beholds something of the Godhead. Since no one can see the unrevealed God and live, so he falls down, ***Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord***

This is a story we encounter over and over again in the Scriptures: God manifests Himself to his future prophet, or Apostle, or other messenger, as He had never done before. Moses says, 'I am slow of speech and of a slow tongue,' Jeremiah: 'I cannot speak, for I am a child,'. Isaiah: 'I am a man of unclean lips, or, as here, *I am a sinful man*. The person who encounters God falls on his face, sets his mouth in the dust, takes the shoes from off his feet. But God does not leave him there. The word of the Lord is not – Oh, I see, you don't really have the self-confidence or the self-belief which is necessary to do this. Instead] ... out of the depth of this humiliation God raises up another person, an instrument fitted for the work of God. This is a new person, a person who would not have been made if he had never come face to face with his weakness, his sinfulness, and his need.⁴ The new person would not have been born if he had not seen something of the face of God, if he had not been willing to launch out into the deep, and put down the nets.

The Gospel for today invites us to see St Peter's despair after a long-night of work as a kind of comment on our struggle with love: *Master, we have toiled all night, and have taken nothing*. This sense of futility, of being stuck in the dark, can lead us to withdraw, even to flee from one another. I'm not going to bother any more, it's not worth it, I can't take it, I'll just withdraw to my corner and watch things happen around me. If we cannot love, then perhaps we will at least protect ourselves and protect others. But the divine love and mercy does not leave Peter alone, the divine love does not leave us alone: *launch out into the deep, and let down your nets*.⁵

What will we find if we are given grace to step out beyond frustration or fatigue or distrust? What are we being invited to discover? *launch out into the deep, and let down your nets*. Dr Pusey describes these deeps for us:

Oh deep Ocean of joy and bliss and love, wherein we shall ever freely range, ever longing yet ever satisfied; ever filled yet never sated; ever loving yet never weary; ever receiving fresh streams of love and glory and bliss from the exhaustless Fountain of all Good, which is God.⁶

³ 'A Revelation is religious doctrine viewed on its illuminated side; a Mystery is the selfsame doctrine viewed on the side unilluminated. Thus Religious Truth is neither light nor darkness, but both together' (Newman 1839b, 9).

⁴ Quoted and adapted from R. C. Trench, On the Miracles.

⁵ Christ's words teach us to see all of what he is doing here as a parable and a prophecy. These little ships are pictures of the Church, perhaps the two ships of the Jews and the Gentiles. The crowd was stretched out along the shore like the world which hears the words of Christ spoken from the boat of the Church. & c. – Ambrose, Bede, et al.

⁶ E. B. Pusey, *A Course of Sermons on Solemn Subjects* chiefly bearing on Repentance and Amendment of Life, Preached in St. Saviour's Church, Leeds, During the Week after its Consecration on the Feast of

S. Simon and S. Jude, 1845.(Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1845). SERMON XV. (Preached on the Sunday Morning, Nov. 2.) 1 JOHN iii. 2. *Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when He shall appear, we shall be like Him; for we shall see Him as He is.*

The passage quoted here comes toward the end of the introduction to this sermon:

It is a common, misgiving, thought, when men would turn to God, or even when they are in some way religious, "how can I be happy in heaven? what will be its happiness?" And according to men's tempers, they will further say, "Here I am ever doing; the duties of life give me what to do; I study, it may be, or labour or do the works of my calling, and I can picture to myself being happy, if I have something wherein to *do* God's will; but I am soon weary when I would think of God; if I use prayers given me by holy men, or the Divine Psalms, I cannot fix my thoughts long upon God; even, when He gives me most grace, and I feel borne out of myself, in love, or praise, or thankfulness, and for the time could forget myself and all created things, in the sweetness of the love of God, I soon fall back in weariness; it is good to cleave fast to God, but I am weak and cannot hold on; I could think that Eternity could be happy, were it all like such moments as these, but how can I love and praise for all Eternity, and be unwearied still? Change is my very refreshment here, can I then find joy in the one single love of God?"

Such thoughts imply a state more or less imperfect. They are doubtless sometimes sent by God, to make us feel how imperfect our state is; that we are too much taken up with the things of this life; that Heaven, being little in our thoughts, and so a strange place to us, we cannot understand the joys of those who dwell there; that our hearts are too much scattered among outward things, and so cannot think what it could be to be wholly knit and gathered up in God; that we, dwelling little on the thought of God and His Goodness, seldom conversing with Him, have but a faint love, and so cannot understand what it would be to love on for ever. In part, they are true, that, we cannot in this life imagine what the bliss of Heaven will be. For, "now we see through a glass darkly;" how can we think what it will be, "face to Face to see God?" Now "we know in part;" what a mystery then to us, that we "shall know God, even as we are known," enter into the very secrets of His love, share in His Knowledge, His Wisdom, His Power, His Will, His Glory, His Beauty, His Bliss, His Love which is His Bliss, know God with the same knowledge wherewith He knows us, save that we are bounded, He unbounded, or Infinite! Still, after our measure, we shall have entrance to all the thoughts of God, see things without Him as He sees them; see within Himself, in a manner, as He sees Himself; we shall be ourselves within Him, enfolded by His Essence and Essential Glory and Love; and as He knows us, by His Presence in our souls, so we shall know Him by being taken up within Him, there to contemplate Him, to read His Excellence and His Goodness eye to Eye, more than, in the face we here best love, we can read the deepest love, with which any in God here loves us. Truly, "eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love Him." For the "good things which God hath prepared" are God Himself; and, "no man, while in the flesh, can see God and live." Sooner could the worm, which, encased in a hard crust of wood or pebbles, lies lifeless, imagine what it would be, when it rises, as it were, from its grave and flies free and aloft to the day; sooner could the child in its mother's womb, imagine the power and strength and understanding of the full-grown- man; sooner one born in a dungeon imagine, out of its darkness, the glories of the richest gladliest day; than we, out of this our prison-house could, even from those rays of light wherewith God at times bedews the faithful soul, tell what it will be to be within the full Light of His Countenance. St. Paul, when rapt up into Paradise, "heard unspeakable words, which it was not lawful for a man to utter;" St. John saw the Vision of our Lord in glory, and heard the heavenly harps, and the new song of the redeemed, and saw the glory of the Heavenly City, and Him that sat upon the Throne, and the blessed company round about the Throne, as "they worshipped Him That liveth for ever and ever;" yet neither St. Paul nor the beloved disciple knew what the full bliss of heaven would be; for St. Paul still says, "it hath not entered the heart of man," and St. John, "Beloved, now are we the sons of God; and it doth not yet appear what we shall be."

It may then be some contentment to us, yea surely it is an earnest of the greatness of our bliss, that no one in the flesh can understand it. Picture we all the joy of the whole world, not those fleeting miserable joys which the poor "world which lieth in wickedness" seeks after, but all the purest, brightest, most transporting joys, which ever filled the soul of any saint of God; think we of the calm bliss of St. John, when he knew in himself that "he that dwelleth in love, dwelleth in God, and God in him," or of St. Paul, when he said, "to me to live is Christ;" and "not I, but Christ liveth in me;" or of martyrs, when for the abundance of joy, they joyed in spirit, while their flesh was consumed; or of St. Stephen, when he saw heaven opened, and his Redeemer standing to defend him, and ready to receive him, and place him by His Side, on His Throne; or any who have so loved that they could say with the spouse in the Canticles, "I am faint with love;" "I am my Beloved's and my Beloved is mine," and could hardly support the fulness of the consolations of God; these had some foretaste, but they could not, as yet, even conceive the bliss of Heaven; for it "hath not entered into the heart of man." Oh deep Ocean of joy and bliss and love, wherein we shall ever freely range, ever longing yet ever satisfied; ever filled yet never sated; ever loving yet

Oh deep Ocean of joy and bliss and love, where we shall run and not be weary, or not weary in the same way at least. For Pusey, this conclusion comes at the end of a long passage where he launches out into the deep. He takes us to this conclusion more patiently and carefully than the restraints of time allow me. So, if you want to explore Pusey's journey into the deep, the notes of the on-line version of this sermon will give you opportunity to do so.

We have been on a journey into divine love. What makes it possible to live in this house, what makes it possible not just to *hear* Ambrose, or Augustine, or Pusey speaking to us about the 'deep Ocean of joy and bliss and love', what changes everything so that we encounter or know this reality, is not a commandment. Not even a commandment to love can bring us to know or rejoice in love. What changes everything, for Peter and for us, is an encounter with a person. Peter sees Jesus. Peter sees the Lord Jesus, his Master and His Friend, He sees not just the surface, but something of depths of divine love and wisdom.⁷ He sees these things as the personal and majestic characteristics of the one he is coming to love. He draws back, he falls down. The divine love picks him up. Peter is re-born. This is our journey into divine love. We are not just starting it today. We have been re-born. the principle of the divine love and life animates us. And yet, the work is not complete. We are invited to launch out into the deep.

In the Gospels we often encounter Peter putting himself forward, full of zeal, but not able to stay the course. In the Epistle, we here the Peter who has been born from above:

BE ye all of one mind, having compassion one of another, love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous; not rendering evil for evil, or railing for railing: but contrariwise blessing; ...But and if ye suffer for righteousness' sake, happy are ye: and be not afraid of their terror, neither be troubled; but sanctify the Lord God in your hearts.

St Peter's exhortation is not an impossible command. It is the overflowing of divine love in him, and an invitation to us to step into this love, to live in it. There is a kind of joy in what he is saying.

You will perhaps be relieved to realize that I have run out of time to say how this would affect our engagement with the great themes of *Living in Love and Faith* which I've touched on the past few weeks. It is true, that the claims of love on us, the claims of God's wisdom and goodness on all our lives, much be worked out in a way that is intelligible, which can make sense both of the Scriptures and of our lives known through them. In the end, the challenging claims of love on us may be intelligible, but

never weary; ever receiving fresh streams of love and glory and bliss from the exhaustless Fountain of all Good, which is God.

It were then the part of faith to believe, that, if we love God, we must be happy, because we have His word for it. If He willeth to make us happy, how should we not be so? If He says, "Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord," into His own very joy, must we not joy, when He has thus enfolded us with joy? Shall His Almightyness fail, that He cannot make us happy? or His love Who became Man to die for us, that He will not? or His own Fulness of Bliss, wherein He hath been Himself "Blessed for ever," that It should not suffice us, when He filleth us with all the love which we can contain?

⁷ This is what Pusey describes in the long foot-note above, the encounter with the divine-human Beloved.

what makes them part of the life which St Peter describes, part of the life where we are lifted up on eagle's wings, is the encounter which St Peter has, and to which we are invited. Our Lord loves us before we love him. This love makes a kind of sense, but not one that is easily accessible to us. It offends our calculations. It is relentless.

Launch out into the deep. Launch out into the depths of the divine wisdom and goodness. There we see the face of our Lord Jesus, and that changes everything. The invitation is repeated whenever we are invited to the altar here, whenever we hear the Scriptures read – Launch out into the deep, Fear not, take and eat.