

The Fifth Sunday after Trinity
Fr Richard Harrison

Going Out into the Deep Part I A Sermon on Luke 5.1–11 for Pusey House, Oxford

“Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.”

Words from the 8th verse of the 5th Chapter of the Gospel of Luke

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Jesus has **begun** his ministry. He has withstood the temptation of the devil in the desert. He has **read** from the scroll of the Prophet Isaiah in the synagogue in Nazareth. He has **taught** with authority in the synagogue in Capernaum. He has **given orders** to the evil spirits and exorcised them. He has **healed** Simon Peter’s mother-in-law. He has tried **to get away** from the people crowding around him to a solitary place - and has failed. They **still** crowd around him when he stands at the side of Lake Gennesaret and he gets in to Simon’s boat and asks Simon to just go a little way from the shore – not **too** far – so he can preach.

Jesus is a remarkable man: he teaches, he heals, he has authority over evil and sickness. But he **isn’t a fisherman**. He is able to ask Simon to carry him a little way from the shore, because Simon’s boat, together with the boat belonging to James and John, had been used all night to fish **without** success now at the beginning of the day, they had come to land to wash their nets and so their boats were not being used.

Simon was a **good** man. He must have been **tired** but **still** he put off from the shore. Then Jesus finishes his teaching and decides to give Simon Peter **advice** – and amazingly Simon accepts that advice.

He does point out that he has been fishing all night (when the fishing is better,) but he agrees to what Jesus says – to launch into the deep and put their nets down again – the nets they had just been cleaning.

And then there is THIS miracle – a miracle happening as it were in Simon’s area of expertise: Simon might not be a **teacher** or a **healer** but **he** is a fisherman. They catch **so many fish** that they ask for the second boat, the boat belonging to James and John, to join them and help them. They catch **so many** fish that both their boats begin to sink ...

It’s as if they had won the lottery. They were now facing the possibility of being seriously wealthy with all those fish to sell. But it becomes clear that there is something more important at stake here than **wealth**. (Although of course we **all** like wealth ...) What was at stake was recognising **who Jesus was** – and it was in this recognition that Simon Peter came to know who he was himself: not a fisherman **but a fisher of men**.

Both Simon Peter’s recognition of Jesus – and his own realisation that he, Simon, was called to follow him - came after a realisation of **who he really was**... a realisation of his own sinfulness – that he was and is a sinner:

“Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.” -

It is as if the Christian life – certainly in the example of Simon Peter here – had to begin with a recognition of being a sinner – and **then** we hear the words of Jesus **“Fear not: do not be afraid ...”**

This story is a story about **identity** and is a story about **trust**. We are on a journey to find out who we are and that is in some way connected to finding out **who Jesus is** ... And it takes a long time. It’s maybe easy to think ...“Oh- **sorted – of course** – Peter to is to be a fisher of men – he has found his vocation!”

But it is **not** that simple – we know that there were many false steps along the way – and most of the are at least partly not to do with who **Peter** is, but who **Jesus** is... There are the times when Peter says that Jesus is doing the wrong thing – because he does **not fully understand** who Jesus is.

It is for example in Matthew Chapter 9 from verse 13 that we hear this:

*Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do **you** say that I am?” Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.*

From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.” But Jesus turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.”

It is clear that on this occasion Peter was not setting his mind on the things of God, but on the things of man ... and of course there are other occasions too ...

It is a warning to us all – we must do our very best to **setting our minds** not on the things of **man** ... but on the things of **God**. But at least Peter – Simon Peter – has begun that process in the reading set for us today. Luke Chapter 5 is a beginning of that long process where Peter finds out who **Jesus** is and so who **HE (Peter)** is, And the fact that it is such a long process if anything should give us hope and re-assurance – if it is a long process for Peter, it will be a long one for us too!

In this sermon about identity, I want to end with a quotation from ‘The Talented Mr. Ripley’ by Patricia Highsmith. It is spoken by the novel's protagonist, Tom Ripley who says: "**I'd rather be a fake somebody than a real nobody.**"

It is clear that this line captures the moral heart of the novel and is a warning to us, for Tom Ripley believes that identity is something that can be fabricated - and most especially fabricated if it brings wealth, status, admiration, and freedom from obscurity as it does for him. But this is where I want my sermon to **end** – we have to go on a **little journey** to get there first ...

Before we end with Ripley, let us return to the context of this encounter between Jesus and Peter: it is obviously important and it is equally obviously not the first time that these two have met... but now they do meet and it is on a boat ...

For at the moment the most important thing about Peter's boat is not that it belongs to Peter. It belongs, for this moment, to Christ Jesus asks to borrow it and it is in that simple request that we can see something of the **whole mystery of vocation**. For this is an example of the way in which, when God calls us (as he does Peter) he does not ask us to become someone else (like Ripley wanted to be someone else) before he calls us. God asks first for what we already possess ... Moses has a shepherd's staff. ... David has a sling ... Mary has her willingness, her obedience, her love and her prayerfulness ... Peter has a **fishing boat**. These are ordinary things that are ours and from that we can see that Grace **almost always** begins with the ordinary. You may imagine that God is waiting until you have **acquired more learning**, greater certainty or a clearer sense of direction before he can use you – and that is not true.

The calling is now – yes NOW! - Christ doesn't say to Peter, “**Return** when you have become a better fisherman.” **He simply steps into the boat Peter already owns.** The Christian vocation begins exactly **where you are**. The Gospel suggests it is the deeper questions that come first. That question is not “Where are you going?” but “**Who is in your boat?**” For what matters in a boat is **who it is** that steers it.

Christ teaches from Peter's boat while it remains close to the shore. Before Peter is sent into the world, he must first **learn to listen**.

For Christian discipleship always begins with **hearing** the Word before attempting the work. That order matters. Christ **first** asks Peter to sit still ... There is a lesson here for every scholar – for we need to learn how study **itself** can become an act of discipleship but **only** if it teaches us **how to listen**. Prayer is, in one sense, simply holy attention. And it begins not with speaking **about** God but with **listening to** God. Only after the teaching does Jesus utter the command that changes everything. **“Put out into the deep.”** The words are as challenging now as they were on the Sea of Galilee.

For the Christian life is full of moments when Christ quietly asks us to sail beyond the waters we can control. There is a modern Greek poem, Ithaka by Constantine Cavafy, one of my most favourite poems in the world and which I have used (in translation!) at every Leavers' service whether at Lancing College (where a former Headmaster now gone to his Reward would read it in the modern Greek) or more recently at Summer Fields.

The poem about returning to Ithaka – also puts before us **life as a long sea voyage**. Its wisdom lies in recognising that the traveller is **changed** by the journey long before reaching the harbour. The sea itself becomes the school of the soul. The purpose of travelling is not simply to **arrive** but to **become**.

*Hope your road is a long one,
full of adventure, full of discovery.
Laistrygonians, Cyclops,
angry Poseidon—don't be afraid of them:
you'll never find things like that on your way
as long as you keep your thoughts raised high,
as long as a rare excitement
stirs your spirit and your body.*

...
*Hope your road is a long one.
May there be many summer mornings when,
with what pleasure, what joy,
you enter harbours you're seeing for the first time;*

That insight harmonises beautifully with today's Gospel. Peter **imagines** that he is going fishing. **Christ** knows that Peter is beginning the longest voyage of his life. The miracle of the fish is only the first stage of a pilgrimage that will take him through Caesarea Philippi, up the road to Jerusalem, into the darkness of Good Friday, to the astonishment of Easter morning, to the fire of Pentecost, and finally, following to ancient tradition, to witness in Rome itself. When Peter pushes his little boat away from the shore, he has no idea where the voyage will end. Neither do we – we have no idea where the journey will end. That may be one of the greatest gifts God gives us.

For the deepest wisdom is not to possess all the answers but to trust the One who calls us onward, even when the horizon remains hidden beyond the sea. Peter's answer to Christ is an understated and yet magnificent act of faith. “Master, we have toiled all the night, and have taken nothing: Nevertheless, at thy word I will let down the net.”

The nets are empty. The labour has been exhausting. Experience points firmly in one direction. Yet there is one fact **greater than experience**: Christ has spoken. **“Nevertheless at thy word, I will let down the net.”** Those three words - **at thy word** - contain the heart of the Christian vocation.

Peter's obedience is not irrational; it is relational: he trusts the speaker. The most important decisions in life are like that. We marry because we trust another person. We devote ourselves to friendships because we trust another person. We answer God's call because we trust another person. The Christian faith is not primarily an assent to propositions. It is confidence in a Person.

THEN there is the miracle! Fish pour into the nets in such abundance that they begin to break, and another boat must be summoned. Soon both boats ride low in the water beneath the weight of an great abundance. The Gospel is full of holy surprise. Again and again Christ overturns expectations. Water becomes wine. Five loaves feed thousands. The blind see. The dead rise. Empty tombs become places of hope. **Grace abounds.**

And yet Luke carefully directs our attention away from the miracle of the fish. Peter sees something infinitely greater than a miracle ... **because he sees Christ**. This miracle, this amazing abundance does not produce pride or greed ... it produces *repentance*. “Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord.”

This is the cry of awakening to realisation as to who we are, and shows how the closer we come to Christ, the more truthfully we can see ourselves.

Peter does not become an apostle because he is fearless, accomplished or morally impeccable. He becomes an apostle because he allows himself to know and be known completely by Christ. And Christ does not turn away.

Instead comes one of the loveliest commands in all Scripture. **“Fear not.”**

How often those words echo through the Bible?

Fear not, Abraham. or Mary. or Joseph. or shepherds.
Fear not, little flock.

For every great act of God perhaps begins by addressing our deepest anxiety.

For fear is the great enemy of vocation. Fear tells us to remain where **the water is shallow**. It tells us **not to risk love** because love may end in grief. Fear tells us **not to forgive** because we may be hurt again. It tells us **not to give generously** because we may ourselves become poor. Fear tells us not to become saints because sainthood looks alarmingly costly. And so ... **we stay near the shore**.

Yet no sailor ever discovered new waters by refusing to leave the harbour. The Christian life is not the elimination of fear. It is learning to hear a stronger voice than fear. **“Fear not.”**

The promise is not that the voyage will be easy. The promise is that Christ remains Lord of the sea.

There is an ancient Christian understanding of the Church as a ship. Even the architecture of a church preserves this memory: we speak of the nave, from the Latin *navis*, a ship. Christians gather within its timbers as travellers crossing dangerous waters together. That is true for Pusey House, Which exists not as a museum for preserving beautiful liturgy —though beauty matters profoundly— nor just as an academic institution, though learning is one of God’s great gifts. Pusey House exists to help form Christians capable of navigating the seas of modern life without losing sight of Christ. You are here not simply to acquire theological information ...but to become navigators of the soul.

And every voyage changes the voyager – for the true pilgrim is never the same on returning home

*Keep Ithaka always in your mind.
Arriving there is what you’re destined for.
But don’t hurry the journey at all.
Better if it lasts for years,
so you’re old by the time you reach the island,
wealthy with all you’ve gained on the way,
not expecting Ithaka to make you rich.*

*Ithaka gave you the marvellous journey.
Without her you wouldn’t have set out.
She has nothing left to give you now.*

And if you find her poor, Ithaka won’t have fooled you.

*Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,
you'll have understood by then what these Ithakas mean*

That is why the Christian tradition has so often spoken of life as pilgrimage. Our destination matters, certainly. We believe in “the life of the world to come.” We look towards the heavenly Jerusalem. We await the resurrection of the dead.

But God is never interested only in destinations. He is interested in us as pilgrims. Every prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, every act of worship may become one more ***stretch of open sea*** by which Christ enlarges the soul. Looking back, we may discover that the moments we thought were delays on the journey were, in fact, the very places where grace was quietly doing its deepest work.

Tom Ripley says, "I'd rather be a fake somebody than a real nobody."

That sounds uncomfortably modern for we live in an age of carefully curated images, social media personas, impressive CVs, and the pressure always to appear successful. Many people fear being ordinary more than being dishonest. They would rather seem important than simply be themselves.

Throughout Scripture, God calls ordinary people —**not** because they appear impressive, but because they are willing. Fishermen, shepherds and tax collectors - all become God's servants ***but without first*** becoming "somebody."

Our identity is ***received***, not manufactured. At Jesus' baptism, the Father's declaration—"You are my beloved Son"—comes **before** any public ministry. In the same way, as Christians we receive our identity as children loved by God **before** we achieve anything.

Jesus repeatedly criticised religious hypocrisy—better an honest sinner than a counterfeit saint. The Christian – we - should be free from the exhausting need to impress. Ripley thought the **worst** thing was to be a "real nobody."

Christianity says the worst thing is to lose yourself ***in the pursuit of being somebody else***. Better to be an unknown disciple whose name is written in heaven, our faith says, than a celebrated fraud whose whole life is a performance. God does not love the person we **pretend** to be. He loves the person he **created** us to be—and in Christ that is enough.

And for Peter the realisation that this is so, begins here on that fishing boat in Luke Chapter 5. For Peter, **the question is not, “What shall I become?”** It is, “For whom shall I become it?” Peter is not called away from the sea because the sea is unimportant. He is called because the whole world has become his sea. Galilee is too small now. The horizon has widened.

*Keep Ithaka always in your mind.
Arriving there is what you're destined for.
But don't hurry the journey at all.
Better if it lasts for years,
so you're old by the time you reach the island,
wealthy with all you've gained on the way,
not expecting Ithaka to make you rich.*

Amen.