



10th February 2019
Isaiah 6.1-8
Luke 5.1-11

Water-colours

Gracious God – we open the bible and long to receive your word – open, we pray, our minds and hearts to receive that word with all its comfort and in all its challenge. Amen.

Every week, when I went to Sunday School at three o'clock in the afternoon with my two brothers, we sang Scripture Union choruses. Mrs Slade was at the piano giving a strong lead – I never once heard her speak a single word, but Sunday by Sunday I sang along to her playing. One of our favourites was: I will make you fishers of men if you follow me. Even as I say those words half a century later I can hear Mrs Slade bash it out on the piano one more time!

Today's lectionary reading takes us to Gennesaret, another name for Lake Galilee as we go fishing with Peter in his boat.

My fishing days were rather cut short in the hot summer of 1976. My brothers and I – maybe inspired by our Scripture Union song, took the bus into town to get some bait for our fishing rods. All was going well until, on the bus journey home (in those days parents didn't seem a necessary accompaniment on a bus) I noticed the bait bag had split and crawling along the window moving away from us in the direction of the seat in front was a stately procession of about fifty maggots. I seem to remember, even though it wasn't our stop, we rang the bell and alighted as quickly as possible – leaving the stray maggots behind on one of the hottest days of the year. Oh, the delinquent life your minister once lived!!

Well, no lines in today's narrative just nets.

We find Jesus surrounded by such a mass of people that he's pushed to the very edge of the lake. He takes Simon Peter's boat as his floating pulpit and teaches his eager listeners from it.

As the crowd disperses we might have expected that to be the end of the story. Instead Rabbi Jesus instructs fisherman Simon to put out into deep water and try fishing again. Reluctantly this man whose worked the Galilean waters all his life does what he's told, and the catch exceeds all expectations.

So let's, briefly, consider three 'paintings' based on the narrative this morning. Tissot's, featured on our orders of service and in the corridor, Luke's painting from the gospel narrative and how we might put ourselves in the picture and make our own water-colour based on today's lectionary reading.

All the pictures in the current Art in the Corridor exhibition are by James Tissot. He was a French artist who belongs to the second half of the 19th century and was used to painting society ladies in Paris. For a time, he was great friends with the Impressionists. Then, in

the last twenty years of his life, now living in London, he had a renewal of his early Catholic faith and painted, in a realism style, no less than 365 opaque watercolour scenes from the bible, today held in the Brooklyn Museum. To help him do that he made three trips to Israel to study the people and architecture there.

His painting: The First Miraculous Draught of Fish, shows a boat heaving under its catch. Tissot painted abundance. After the first fishing trip caught nothing, this second attempt produced a catch like no other.

Is the message, I wonder, about the Jesus who has come to affirm life and offer it to us in its fulness? This is a belief in a generous God. A boat almost sinking under the weight of so many fish.

So, what, as it were, of Luke's painting? His brushstrokes are words.

Luke creates this scene of Jesus, after the sermon had finished, instructing Simon to push out to the deep waters and go fishing for the second time that day.

I'm not sure how much Jesus, who had grown up in a carpenter's workshop knew about fishing but we can be sure that Luke knew how his original readers would respond to that phrase; the deep waters.

There was an Ancient Near Eastern tradition that to speak of the deep waters was to think of all that made life anxious, chaotic and confusing. Both the Jewish and Christian scriptures pick up on that tradition.

Today we almost seem affronted by the power of the sea, as if we are surprised that we haven't tempered it and that so often it remains outside our control. Maybe an ancient people had a greater humility in that they were only too aware of the devastating power of the water that makes up 70% of the earth's surface. To them there was a chilling reality about the phrase 'deep water' and they used it to speak of the chaos that could both literally and metaphorically dominate their experience. Even today we speak of being in 'too deep' or of 'drowning' under a particular struggle.

This was a confusing time to be part of the Early Church. Luke's readers wondered who to believe and trust. They were having to face issues such as how much of their Jewish background should they continue to own and there were tensions in these new congregations about whose teaching was true and from God. They were even disappointed that Jesus hadn't returned for that's what they seemed to have initially expected, so how now were they to cope with this delay, how were they to live as the Church in this in between time? For them, maybe, this felt like a 'deep water' moment.

The first book of the bible, Genesis, in its creation poem initially focuses on the power of the waters and their separation into sea and cloud.

Yet Jesus commands Simon to deliberately and purposefully sail into the deep waters. It's there that he is to go fishing

In fact, these waters make a backdrop for several gospel stories.

One day Jesus met the apostles as he walked on water and invited Simon Peter to do the same. On another occasion Jesus is asleep when the boat hits the eye of the storm. In mortal panic he's roused from his slumbers by seasoned sailors who have lost their sea legs and in response to their pleading he bids the wind, rain and waves to cease and the storm is stilled.

These incidents are all, as it were 'water-colours'; they are paintings with a message. That message was the substance of Isaiah's words when he says of God: *When you go through deep waters, I will be with you. When you go through rivers of difficulty, you will not drown.*

The gospel writers wanted the early Church to be a faithful Church even at the most pressing and demanding of situations. To encourage them they painted the idea that even in the fiercest storm, in the deepest waters, with Christ in the vessel the waves would not overwhelm them.

So, I wonder how we would paint our own water-colour today? What might this morning's reading say to us?

I suspect it's true to say all of us, from time to time go through deep waters. Times in our lives when our resolve is tested. Moments of sorrow and seasons of struggle. The human condition is never one of constant, undiluted happiness.

Yet the biblical understanding of challenge and crisis when we feel we are in at the deep end, is that God holds us and love sustains us even in the eye of the storm.

And perhaps there is another aspect to all this.

In Luke 5 Jesus ends this story of boats, nets and fish with those famous words to his would-be apostles: from now on you will be fishing for people.

It's yet another metaphor about bearing witness to Jesus and sharing faith. It's about living the faith in such a way that those around us catch the essence of what drives and inspires us. It's often been said that faith is caught rather than taught. Well, how and when do we do that?

It would be natural to assume that maybe our lives speak most clearly about faith when we are paddling in the shallows; when life is straightforward, uncomplicated and unpressurised.

But that's not the message of today's story. No. Simon Peter and his crew had been doing that all night with nothing to show for it. After his 'Teaching by The Lake' session Jesus tells them to push out and let down their nets in deep water.

Of course, it's picture language, but isn't it a way of saying that just maybe our light shines brightest at the darkest moments. When we in the deep waters perhaps, then more than ever our lives will say much about faith.

It means the family notice when we face a bereavement with hope and trust in the eternal

love of God.

It means a work colleague notices how we respond to pressure in the office to cut corners or how we go the extra mile to help those lower down the career ladder.

It means your friends are deeply touched to see the number of times you visit a spouse in the care home even when recognition becomes faded.

In these situations, and a hundred others, we are passing through the deep waters – yet even at these moments, just maybe our witness to God and his love is at its strongest.

Just recently we watched the fascinating mini TV serial *The Long Song* about the Christmas slave rebellion on the island of Jamaica in 1832. The drama was so well researched that it made reference to the leader of that protest as Sam Sharpe.

I knew I recognised that name so I did some digging!

Sam Sharpe was a slave and a Baptist lay preacher and went to his local Baptist Chapel in Montego Bay. In fact, this whole rebellion was known on the island as the Baptist War.

That's because ministers like Thomas Burchell, Sam Sharp's pastor, and William Knibb, a BMS missionary to Jamaica from Kettering – these Christians stood up for the oppressed and championed the cause of abolition.

These were deep water times. In the British Empire of the 1830's, the thought of the Abolition of Slavery was as controversial and complex as Brexit is today. Cities like Bristol and Liverpool had been built on the slave trade. It's the reason why the British plantation owners in Jamaica had a nickname for the BMS missionary William Knibb, they called him 'The Monster'.

These followers of Jesus Christ were not just wading in the shallows, they were prepared to push out into the deep waters of conflict and controversy, and in the storm that followed many, in the end, recognised that they were people of faith, of love and of justice. In 1975 the Government of Jamaica proclaimed Sam Shape a National Hero, his face is on the islands \$50 bank note and today the Baptist Union of Great Britain holds an annual lecture in his honour every year.

We are called by Jesus, not just to live out our faith on those blue sky days, but to push out and even in the deeper waters – in the chaos and challenge of those more difficult moments – to be a witness to God and his love. Because, just maybe that's actually the best time to go fishing in the Kingdom of God.

In your deep water moments may you know the presence and strength of God, and as you seek to hold on to faith in the storm, may your life and mine point to the one who, even in the presence of so much chaos, offers us all peace, purpose, meaning and hope.

May it be so, in the name of The Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Ian Green, Amersham, 7th February 2019