**9th February 2025**

**Isaiah 6.1-8
Luke 5.1-11**

# Fishy Tales

*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*.

We spent part of one holiday in the northeast of Scotland on the coast at Burghead. Our accommodation had a balcony facing the harbour where every evening we’d see four or five compact fishing trawlers head out to the North Sea and then, come breakfast we witnessed their return, accompanied by much activity from the harbour staff as the catch was unloaded.

I sometimes think of that holiday on a Tuesday when I walk through the market on Sycamore Road and see the long queue up to the fish van advertising its produce as being fresh from Grimsby. I wonder what time their boats left and returned.

Well, today’s gospel from Luke 5 takes us to Gennesaret, another name for Lake Galilee as we go fishing with Peter in his boat.

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 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 and that’s one of the themes that emerges from today’s text. Why not have a look at the print of that painting after the service.

In those far off days family groups like Andrew and Peter, James and John, clubbed together in a kinship group to buy a licence to fish on Galilee. That’s because, as with so much in Jesus’ day, the nation was living under Roman occupation which meant all the fish in the lake technically belonged to Ceasar, so communities who had owned boats for generations now needed to pay for the privilege. This wasn’t a free market with the licenses often being sold by the local tax collectors.

Boats like Peter’s often went out at night using trammel nets made out of linen. In the daytime these would have been visible to the fish but not at night. So, as Jesus the Rabbi sits in a boat it’s quite possible that just a few hundred yards away Peter and Andrew would have been washing and cleaning their trammel net from the night before.

Now as we go fishing this morning, fishing for some insights from today’s narrative, I think the first bite on the line comes when we realise that chapter 5 isn’t the first encounter Simon Peter had with Jesus. For just a few verses back in chapter 4, after attending a service in the local synagogue, we read of Jesus visiting the home of Peter and healing his mother-in-law. Jesus had been a welcome guest that day and was there by invitation of Peter and his family.

One thing so often leads to another on anyone’s journey of faith. For Peter it didn’t start with the fishing of Luke 5 but with the visit of the compassionate Jesus to his family at a moment of crisis in Luke 4. Sometimes, actually maybe oftentimes, faith cooks slowly. We start thinking, pondering, exploring and wondering.

So, Peter already knew the Jesus who now tells him to go out fishing in the daytime, probably using the inappropriate, but newly cleaned, trammel nets with which they had done so badly the night before.

I thought The BBC did a great job with Songs of Praise a fortnight ago as Pam Rhodes interviewed the singer Barbara Dickinson, who spoke of her journey of faith. Of a home life where Methodism and Scottish Presbyterianism were mixed together, giving her an eclectic introduction to Christianity. And then as a young adult, now living in Edinburgh, alongside her love of being in the city’s pubs and clubs exploring folk music, she also found a place of love and welcome in a local Roman Catholic congregation. She said, for her, it felt like coming home and today, now newly returned to the city, she worships at St Mary’s Catholic Cathedral.

I love hearing of people’s journeys of faith and some of you have told me yours and no two journeys are ever the same. For Peter there seems to have been constituent parts, encounters with Jesus in the home and then at his work, and only when these separate encounters were put together did it all begin to make the sort of sense that transformed him from the inside out. It takes time. It takes listening, and indeed it’s a journey that’s never completely finished this side of the grave. We are always thinking, pondering, exploring and wondering and its why one of the best metaphors for being a Christian is to consider ourselves as always on a journey in which, every day, we learn more about God, ourselves and neighbour.

So, the second bite on our fishing line this morning is that mind blowing catch that stunned season fishermen. Indeed, it’s such a dramatic story that it seems to be used twice in the gospels. It’s first outing is here in Luke at the start of Peter’s journey with Jesus, and quite possibly it’s second is in John’s gospel when it’s positioned post resurrection at the end of Jesus’s ministry just before the re-instatement of Peter. The gospels are not newspapers with everything in neat order, more like novels purposefully blending narrative and myth to make a point.

Film makers have loved playing out this scene with exhausted crew members hauling in nets ladened with hundreds of wriggling fish, so much taken on board so quickly that the boat begins to capsize and help from another vessel belonging to James and John is called for.

But maybe the significance of this abundant catch doesn’t end there. Have you ever wondered what the brothers in the kinship group did with the best of all catches? Luke tells us, they did nothing with it. That’s right – they didn’t box it up and spend the rest of the day selling it. Instead, we read: *As soon as they had brought the boats to land, they left everything and followed him.* Presumably then, that once in a lifetime haul of fish was left behind too!Commentators ponder the intriguing possibility that the local community enjoyed that harvest from the Sea of Galilee as a generous gift brought about because Jesus had been in town and because four well known fisherfolk had listened to his words and obeyed his command. A haul that could have benefitted the bank balance of just a few became an extravagant gift for the many.

I remember reading, whilst on a visit to Australia, that in the late 19th century the word Wowser, Australian slang for a puritanical, kill joy sort of person, was one often attributed to Christians. It doesn’t quite make sense when we recall how Jesus turned water into wine, brought joy to the lame and the blind, told stories about heavenly banquets or the fatted calf being killed to welcome home a wayward son. The dominant narrative of the Jesus story is of God’s abundant, overflowing life touching ours to make our life deeper, richer and whole. No, one of the most important parts of today’s story is that idea of a God who is for us, a generous God whose love is abundant.

Now, before we finally reel in the line, I feel just one last tug upon the rod this morning. And it’s the thought that Jesus is turning the scriptural image of fishing on its head as he invites Peter to become part of a new narrative.

Peter doesn’t feel very good about himself in Luke 5. Maybe he’s aware that having that positive encounter with Jesus in Luke 4, the time when his mother-in-law was healed, that just maybe he should have trusted Jesus more when told to go out and do some daytime fishing. But he questioned Jesus instead of trusting him. He was, initially, understandably sceptical. So now he feels a little foolish. He’s let himself down.

That’s why the invitation of Jesus for the fish worker called to fish for people might have really touched Peter’s heart. For unlike us, Peter might have been aware that in the Jewish scriptures, in books like Amos, Jeremiah and Habakkuk, there is the idea that when God goes fishing, he catches sinners and brings them to judgment. So, Jesus takes this rather severe and negative traditional image of fishing and turns it on its head, so that those caught are now being offered salvation instead. Maybe Peter viewed himself as a fish to be caught and thrown away, yet his new Master invites him to join in the fishing so that more and more people, just like him, can be blessed by the love and good news of the Jesus story. A negative image about fishing is turned into a gloriously positive one of giving people fresh hope, healing and wholeness, and Jesus says to Peter – just as God said to Isaiah in our first reading, *you may not consider yourself worthy, but I need your help in sharing my love and light.* So, there is inclusivity in our fishing story this morning, as Jesus calls Peter to lay down those trammel nets and follow him.

Our past does not need to define our present because we trust in a God of grace who offers us new beginnings and fresh starts. Day by day God’s gracious invitation is for us the same one as offered to Peter to *come and follow me.*

So may we, in our leaving, come home to God and find a life made whole in love and light. In the name of Jesus who still calls. Amen.

*Ian Green, Amersham, 6th February 2025*