

Being transformed by the grace of God, and a little about fishing

Isaiah 6:1-8; Psalm 138; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Luke 5:1-11

Good morning. It is great to see you all here today. There are some people who would take the opportunity this weekend to relax, veg out and do a little fishing – all good things, but on this day we are here to worship and to delight in the glory, might and holiness of God.

This morning I would like to share some thoughts with you about fishing and about being transformed by the grace of God.

Our readings today tell of God's gift of grace – to Isaiah; to David; to Peter, James and John; to Paul; and to all the followers of Jesus, including us.

Now grace can be a tricky concept because many different people have different ideas about God's grace, although they may have a considerable amount of common ground in their thinking. As a word it is as full of meaning as a treasure chest is full of treasure. Nevertheless, just as all those diamonds and rubies and pearls and gold chains may all be termed treasure, so the many concepts of grace generally all share the notion of God's love, freely given to those who do not merit it - a love that tells of God's nature and intention towards us, not of our nature and intention towards God or towards our fellow human beings. So when we talk about grace today, that's what we are talking about – God's actively given, lavishly given, generous, unmerited love. Not just an attitude of love but love in action. We are also considering our need for God's grace and our response to God's great and loving gift of grace, forgiveness, reconciliation, restoration, salvation – all those wonderful things.

One of my most vivid childhood memories is of a holiday at the beach. On this particular day, there were fishermen working with nets and a boat, the only time I have ever seen this. They rowed out from the beach, lowering their nets as they enclosed a shoal of fish. They rowed back to the beach and began to haul in the nets from both ends. It was slow, heavy work and many people on the beach joined in to help haul those heavy nets. As the nets came out of the water, there were some

fish caught in the mesh, and many fish trapped in the slowly closing space. Finally the full net was ashore, bursting with large numbers of fish. All those who had helped with the heavy labour were allowed to take 1 or 2 fish home to cook. No more than 2 each - enough for a good meal for the whole family, but leaving the bulk of the catch for the fishermen.

In the gospel reading there is a lot about fishing. Let's picture the scene. There was a fishing boat from this time discovered in 1986. The boats of Simon, James and John were not necessarily identical, but this boat was about 8 metres long. As a working boat, it would take a crew of about 5 – family members and hired labourers. Picture it here where we are sitting. How would an 8 metre fishing boat fit in this space?

Jesus used Simon's boat to preach to the crowd when the shoreline became too crowded. When Jesus was preaching, were Simon, James and John watching with rapt attention? Perhaps Simon Peter was, after he rowed Jesus out on the boat. But verse 2 tells us that the reason Jesus could use a boat was that the fishermen were washing their nets. They had finished work for the day and they needed to maintain their equipment. Washing and mending the nets took time but was essential if they were to fish again the next day. This is worth remembering. When Jesus told Simon to let down the nets once more, the most likely response was not just "We tried that. The fish are not here today" but "We've just washed the nets. If we let them down again, we will have all that work to do over again, and probably still have no fish."

Nevertheless, Simon did take his boat and his crew out again. When Jesus told Simon to row out to deep water and put down the nets, Simon had other unnamed crew members with him. The verb to let down is plural so it is a task for a group of people, and then we have *When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break.* And so they called for help from the other boat and the catch was such that both boats almost sank.

Was Simon Peter's response "*Thanks Mate. Good tip. Glad you spotted those fish.*"?

No, he saw that this was not just a carpenter knowing more about fishing than a professional fisherman. It was a sign of divine knowledge, care

and generosity, of unmerited love – a gift of grace; and Simon's response was an increased awareness of his own unworthiness. *Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man.*

Jesus responds with reassurance (*Don't be afraid*) and tells Simon that there is a task for him. He will fish for people, gather them in and bring them to God.

The fishermen that day on the Lake of Gennesaret, which is another name for the Sea of Galilee, received more than a gift of fish, they received a gift of grace. And their response? To follow Jesus, who knew their desires and their capability, and who enabled them to do more than they could do in their own knowledge and strength. He told them that they would fish for men, and they believed and they followed.

The pattern of this story matches the pattern of today's reading from Isaiah. Here we also see an experience of God, a realisation of unworthiness, reassurance, and a call to service.

Isaiah discovers his lack of self-worth in contrast with the glory, might and holiness of God in his vision. He is changed by God's initiative. And finally Isaiah responds by turning to serve God.

Woe to me! Isaiah cries. I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.

God sends a seraph to Isaiah to show him that his guilt is taken away, his sins atoned for.

And then after this reassurance, this gift of transforming grace, again we have the sending forth. *Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?* And Isaiah responds. *Here am I. Send me.* Isaiah believed and he responded.

Simon's story and Isaiah's story is our story also.

Today we meet together in worship to share our own experience of the greatness of God.

We confess our sins. We receive absolution and reassurance. We give thanks. We come together to the Lord's Table. And finally we undertake to go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

May today's readings serve as a reminder for us today. May the Lord lead us all into worship that helps us to experience God and to discover our need for God; may our worship time together allow us to confess our sins and be cleansed in order to make us fit and available for God's service.

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.