

Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Fishers of Men

February 10, 2019

Fr. Tim Clancy, S.J.

Why does Jesus choose fishermen to be his disciples? One would think that Jesus would want to recruit movers and shakers, well networked people, articulate, well educated, like learned philosophy professors. But no. The first disciples he calls are fishermen. Is it just a coincidence or could there be something about what it takes to be a good fisherman that will make them good fishers of men? Now I do not fish myself, but I have watched a movie about guys fishing. –A River Runs Through It—set in Missoula, which actually does portray fly fishing as an analogy for the spiritual life. What struck me from that movie, is that fishing takes patience. Nothing much is happening, other than doing the same thing over and over again, the same graceful motion back and forth, casting over the waters. It also takes being still, blending into the surroundings, orally if not visually. And it takes being able to read the waters, an ability to see the life below the surface. To see where the fish are biting, to know what the fish are biting.

I suspect we would all prefer to have God call us the way he calls Isaiah in today's first reading. A vision of the Lord seated on his throne, the ground trembling beneath our feet, clouds of smoke filling the room, and angels hovering overhead, chanting, "Holy, Holy, Holy." Such a call could strengthen the weakest backbone. After such a call, who would not drop everything and devote the rest of their life to following God's will?

But God is more apt to call us as Jesus calls these fishermen. Jesus suggests they do once more what they have already been doing all night to no avail. But when they do it for his sake, they find that their daily routine yields surprising, even wondrous results. Even the wonder though takes the right kind of eye to notice. It's not some surreal apocalyptic vision, the moon does not fall from the sky, the sun does not dance, it's only a bunch of fish. But Peter James and John are no less struck with awe at the sight, that was Isaiah in the temple, for they know about fish and they know such a haul is not their own doing.

If we are to hear God's call, then in our own daily interactions with one another, we need to watch with the eyes of a fisherman for where the fruit of our action surpasses our own doing. We need to stay still to glimpse those signs of life beneath the surface of things. We need to wait, ready to respond the moment we feel the tug of greater life on our line.

Patience, attentiveness, stillness—we are not trained in these virtues by our high tech, high speed world. Multitasking diffuses our attention, efficiency is the very antithesis of patience. Our smartphones, tablets and laptops fill the empty spaces between our activities. If we are to ever see Christ, hear his call to us, we will need to unencumber ourselves from all this busy-ness, at least from time to time. To give Christ a chance to reveal himself to us, we will need to schedule time for it too, adding one more activity that is actually a kind of non-activity, what the Chinese call wu wei, acting by not acting, but being still, attentive, patient, observant, mindful, to ponder and reflect, to cast an eye over the swirling waters, to spy new life below the surface, and to learn what's biting.

Jesus too works more like a fisherman than a mover and a shaker. He spends more time listening than talking, more time being than doing. God creates by giving us the space to recreate ourselves. God loves us by teaching us the slow art of loving others, and in so doing he schools us ever so gently in how to love ourselves. It is through such time and

attention that the spirit of God hovers over the watery chaos as in the first lines of Genesis, and draws forth new life, our life from the deep. May we all learn how to become fishers of men.