



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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The Fifth Sunday After Trinity, July 8th, 2012

✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠

People who dine out on the diet of miracles wrought by the special effects people at the movies and on the TV wouldn't be very much impressed by the miraculous draught of fishes in today's Gospel lesson. If the special effects of the "Star Wars" movies are old hat, the rather more modest miracle of the appearance of a huge shoal of fish out of nowhere is hardly likely to inspire a great deal of wonder . . .

And don't imagine that things were all that different 2,000 years ago. Sure people didn't have television in those days, but they certainly knew a lot about miracles. For starters, many ancients myths spoke of miracles; miracles far more spectacular than the miracles recorded in The Bible.

The modesty of the miracles in The Bible, particularly in the Gospels, is one of the most striking things about them. Considering that God's power has absolutely no limits, his restraint in the realm of the miraculous is really quite amazing – quite miraculous, in fact. Compare Jesus' miracles with the spectacular miracles ascribed to the gods in ancient pagan legends: Apollo burning up the earth with his chariot of fire, the sun; Jason sowing dragons' teeth to create an army – that sort of thing.

By contrast, Jesus' miracles heal the sick, feed the hungry and steer large shoals of fish into fishermen's nets. He never performs a miracle to

enhance his own stature or to get even with somebody who offends him, or to inspire a sense of fear and awe in the bystanders. When Jesus performs a miracle, it's always for the benefit of other people. He performs miracles reluctantly almost – when begged to do so or make an important theological point.

He never performs a miracle to take a short cut or to make life easier for himself. When he's hungry, he stays hungry. He doesn't conjure up a gourmet meal out of thin air. When he's hot, he stays hot. He doesn't cool down the sun. When he is hurt, he doesn't heal Himself.

It has been suggested that Jesus performed the miracle of the draught of fishes for his own benefit. After all, he needed assistants and the miracle helped recruit three of them. Not so. It's clear from the Gospels that Peter, James and John had already made up their minds to follow Jesus before he performed the miracle.

When Jesus arrived on the shore of the Sea of Galilee with a vast crowd in tow, the three fishing fleet operators and their hired hands were mending the nets after a long and fruitless night of back breaking labor. But despite being dog-tired, Peter let Jesus use his boat as a podium.

When he was through teaching, Jesus told Peter and his crew to pull out to deep water and put out their nets – no mean undertaking. Handling

the big commercial fishing nets was heavy work. Peter was far from enthusiastic about a landlubber telling him how to run his business: "Rabbi," he said, "We have toiled all night and caught nothing; nevertheless at your word I will let down the net."

But Peter had such high regard for Jesus he subordinated his expert knowledge to the will of Christ. By calling him of "Rabbi" or "Master" demonstrates that he was already committed to be Jesus' disciple. Even so, nobody was more shocked than Peter when, as soon as the net went over the side, it was filled by a vast shoal of fish that appeared out of nowhere. Frantically, he signaled for help, but the shoal was so big it threatened to swamp the second vessel as well.

So why did Jesus perform this miracle when he was already well aware that Peter, James and John were already committed to him. He didn't need to persuade them to make a final commitment that was already made. Neither is it likely he performed the miracle to impress the crowd on the shore. Only expert fishermen are likely to be impressed by such a miracle. Most ordinary folks who see fishermen drop their nets in the water expect them to catch fish.

The miracle was, in fact, performed specifically for Peter, James and John and their father, Zebedee. Its purpose wasn't to enrich them beyond their dreams of avarice. Jesus intended the miracle to reassure his new disciples that if they obeyed God, and put their trust in him, they could expect to experience that same success as evangelists they had just enjoyed – even in the most unpromising of places.

This miracle is a demonstration of what God can help Christians to achieve if they have faith. The net of the Gospel never comes up empty if it is let it down at God's command and in loving obedience to his promises. What's more, the catch will always exceed expectations.

But this is by no means the only lesson to be learned from this miracle. There is Peter's reaction to consider: He falls on his knees,

crying: "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." Most people believe that Peter didn't believe Jesus to be divine until quite late in his ministry.

Peter's confession – "Thou art the Christ, the son of the living God" – was made sometime between the feeding of the 4,000 and the Transfiguration. But Peter's reaction to the miraculous draught of fishes proved he acknowledged Jesus as God from the outset. Before the miracle, Peter called Jesus "Rabbi" -- "master." After it He calls Jesus "Lord," the honorific devout Jews use for God.

The statement "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man" ought to raise a jarring note with devotees of the "love is all you need" Gospel. Peter's terror is totally at odds with the picture of Jesus as an easygoing, non-judgmental buddy, who'll put up with just about any sort of nonsense – except sexism, look-ism and racism.

Peter's reaction to Jesus on discovering he is God does not advance the idea that he's a complete pushover when it comes to forgiving the sins we have committed. He's not likely to be satisfied with a bland "Sor-reeee."

Peter's reaction to the realization that Jesus Christ is God is exactly the same as the reaction of the ancient Israelites upon hearing God utter the Ten Commandments to Moses in the Wilderness: "When the people saw it, they trembled and stood afar off. Then they said to Moses, "You speak with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die."

It is what is known as "the Fear of God" – the only logical human response when brought face to face with limitless holiness, limitless intelligence, limitless power, limitless love and limitless perfection. Under the searching glare of that perfect light, every single one of our flaws, faults and sins are shown up in the sharpest relief. To be sure, Jesus, through his grace, has promised to forgive our sins when we honestly repent them. But exposing our innermost selves to the searing light of his glorious perfection will be a most uncomfortable experience. *AMEN.*