

SERMON AT YORK: 23/1/97: THIRD SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY (OS3):

GEOFF CHADWICK

Mk 1:14-20:

"MENDING AND CASTING NETS"

I have been drawn to a curiosity in today's Gospel reading - Jesus calls Simon and Andrew who were casting their fishing nets; and he calls James and John who were mending their fishing nets. Now, at the risk of reading too much into this fact, I want to suggest that the work of casting nets, and the work of mending nets are highly significant. Perhaps casting and mending are good job descriptions for disciples.

Perhaps these are job descriptions for us disciples of the 21st Century.

The Ministry of Casting our Nets (Evangelism).

The Ministry of casting our nets could otherwise be called evangelism.

I grew up in Fremantle amongst many Italian Fishermen, and I can tell you that casting nets is not a simple business. The nets have to be prepared, the boat has to be equipped, the climate has to be understood, the fish have to be understood and one has to know where to find the fish.

Evangelism is similar. To be a catcher of people requires net preparation, equipping, an understanding of the climate of people's lives, and knowledge of where the fish are at. How well do we do these things?

Net Preparation

There is not much luck in trying to catch people for God if our tools are inadequate. Most of us have probably witnessed the street corner evangelists who shout evangelist slogans to whoever might be passing by. Perhaps this tool of evangelism does have some merit, although I'm inclined to think that it is highly unlikely.

The net, of course, is not technique, but the Gospel message itself. But we need to believe in our net before we can use it well. More than that, we have to know our net intimately. We need to know how it is woven, how to fold it, and how to handle it so that we don't get tangled up in it. Perhaps we don't fish well because we're not sure about our net. Sure, we have a faith but we're not sure how to articulate it.

Yes we do understand the Christian faith but not enough to feel comfortable talking about it.

There is an old saying that "The Christian faith is caught and not taught." I believe this is true but it needs to be taught as well. We cannot go out into the world with our evangelistic net if we don't know what the message of the net is.

So if you're unsure of what the message of the Gospel is let me quote Mark's Gospel:

"The kingdom of God has come near, repent, and believe in the good news"

(Mk 1:15, NRSV).

And what is the good news?

Let me quote St Paul:

"I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:38-39, NRSV).

The incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ are assurances of this fact.

Equipping

Most of us, I believe, don't know how to fish well. We seem to be lacking in skills. Talking about God, and faith, and Church and Jesus seems difficult to us. We don't know how to cast our net properly - our skills are lacking. Perhaps we throw the net out too violently and frighten the fish away. Maybe we cast the net too timidly so that it never reaches the fish.

We all need to learn how to give "an account of the faith that is within us", but we must know how to do this sensitively.

The best way to start is to share with those who we know already share our faith. If it is difficult to share faith with a fellow believer how much more difficult it is with a non-believer. Small groups help us to do this, as does sharing in worship.

The body of the church also needs to be prepared for the arrival of new fish. Often I have heard people say to me:

"How wonderful it would be to have some new people in the church."

and then go on to say"

"But we mustn't change anything."

What we must realise is that having new people implies change. If we work not to change anything then even our personnel will not change. If we want new fish then we have to provide for them. We have to allow space for them on the deck of the church/boat, we have to make them welcome and we have to take interest in them. Freshly caught fish have a habit of flipping back into the water unless those on the boat take adequate care of them.

An understanding of the climate of people's lives and a knowledge of where the fish are at.

There is no point fishing during unfavourable conditions or where there are no fish. Difficult though it might be, we have to understand the fish if we want to catch them. If we want people to be drawn into the Christian faith, then we must understand their values, dreams, concerns and beliefs. If we do not understand the fish we run the risk of presenting the Gospel message to them in a way which is inappropriate, irrelevant or even offensive. Missionary organizations like ABM and CMS understand this principle

only too well. These days, before one can be a missionary with these organisations several years study of the culture and language of the place of missionary work is necessary before being placed in the field.

Perhaps we need to do this even within our own society. The older generation may need to learn the culture of the younger generation; the "churched" may need to learn the culture of the "non-churched"; and the Christian may need to learn the culture of the non-Christian so they can present the Gospel in a way which is most effective and understandable.

The Ministry of Mending our Nets (Pastoral Care).

Enough said about casting nets. I turn now to the ministry of mending nets. I call this pastoral care. As I said earlier, freshly caught fish have a habit of flipping back into the water unless those on the boat take adequate care of them. This is also true for those caught long ago.

All our net-casting will be in vain if we fail to care. The Gospel message that:

[Nothing] "in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:38-39, NRSV),

will be seen as a lie if the body of Christ, the church, does not display this love.

It is well documented that churches which keep their members are those which care for their members. This caring is beyond being friendly. It moves into friendship and fellowship. It moves into genuine listening and understanding. It incorporates joy and sorrow, pain and elation, celebration and lamentation. It lends a welcoming hand to those who have gone astray, and it knows repentance and forgiveness.

This is the work of repairing nets. My Italian friends in Fremantle used to sit around a table at night telling stories, eating together and drinking together. They used to joke and laugh and cry. They used to argue and bicker, but in the midst of it all they used to repair their nets. And while they repaired their nets they repaired each other's lives.

As we gather to share the Gospel story together, to worship together to eat together and to drink together may we share in the fellowship of mending nets.

May we understand the ministry of James and John - that is - the ministry of mending the nets of our lives together.

The casting nets of Simon and Andrew will only be as effective as we are prepared to mend them.

Let's all be fisherman/fishrwoman for the Lord – but let us not forget to use the skills of both casting and mending.

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.