

Called Towards Eternity
5th Sunday, Year C
1 Corinthians 12: 1-11, Luke 5: 1-11
7 February 2010

Miracles in the New Testament have a common pattern. Jesus turns up in a locality – a protagonist presents an acute human need, often in heart-rending terms – a terse dialogue follows, usually about faith – an act of spiritual power takes place – and a chorus of praise and gratitude draws the story to a close.

How odd then that this morning's Lakeside scene breaks the pattern at a number of crucial points. Nobody asked for this miracle. It doesn't meet any obvious human need. There is a dark side to this overwhelming catch of fish. It almost sinks the boats, thus endangering the lives of the crew. And it is incredibly wasteful. That great pile of fish is left to rot on the beach. Presumably the nets and the boats have also been just abandoned? So what was the point of this unrequested bonanza catch?

Sometimes it helps to visualise these puzzling New Testament scenes with all the imaginative power you can muster, as though you were watching it as a movie. That compressed, struggling mass of fish thrashing around in the nets is what should draw our attention. It is a vivid forward indicator to what will turn out to be the highpoint of Peter's life – the outdoor sermon he will preach on the day of Pentecost which will win 3,000 people over to faith in Jesus as the Messiah. This then is an image of that great harvest of souls, which he will pull in three years from now.

Let's think on about those fish. Pulled out of the lake, they are asphyxiating, and are about to die. Even back in the water, their lives are short. Down there in the depths it is a dog eat dog, or rather a fish eat fish existence. Beautiful, brief, transitory – that is the nature of life for our fishy friends.

But it is a question of perspective. Judged by the standards of our life span it is all over rover in the twinkling of an eye for fish. But compared to trees or stones we are here for a very short time. Still, no matter what kind of a creature, or a part of the world you are, the final reality is that there is an exit point for all of us. Indeed, death is the engine that drives the evolutionary development of life on this planet.

So should we just accept death as a natural and inevitable part of living? While it is true that the ability to face the facts of our biological end with courage and unflinching realism is a big help, the truth is that Christianity doesn't just accept death as the way things were always meant to be. It believes that death crept in to the fabric of earthly existence as a spoiler factor, as the nastiest and ugliest

reality in a world gone wrong because of its rebellion against its maker. The New Testament couldn't be clearer – there is a war going on between the forces of good and evil, the forces of life and death, and it vividly describes death as, “the last enemy.” When God looks at the face of a dead child in Haiti, lying next to an earthquake-flattened building, he sees the face of his enemy death, and he intends to do something about it.

Which is where Paul's message to the Corinthians this morning comes in. God sent his own beloved child in to the world who lived the good life as it was always meant to be lived, a life so outstandingly good than in it the forces of evil were completely overcome for the first time. The death of that beloved child on the cross is both the intersection point of radiant Divine love and radical evil, and it is also the beginning of the reordering of our gone wrong world in such a way that nothing will ever be the same. Raised in to God's fully realised future, in to the Kingdom of God in all its fullness, into the life of the world to come, the beloved Son both pours out the Spirit of future glory on us (the baptised), while at the same time drawing his junior brothers and sisters through the door of death in to the place and space where he is. And he is not stopping there. He is waging war on death; he intends to settle its hash, at a time of the Father's appointing, when the author of the human story has decided that this experiment in freedom has developed to its most appropriate end point.

This then is the content of the gospel that Peter will preach in one of the most successful sermons in Christian history. And notice in the roll call of resurrection witnesses that Paul lists, Peter is the first. He will speak of that which he knows, and has personally experienced.

We then are called towards eternity from the moment of our conception. That is the destiny of every human life, if only he or she will respond to this invitation. Our life here is so brief; even by today's new records of longevity, in which 90 is nothing unusual. Yet many lives are heartbreakingly short, or are filled with lost opportunities and diminished circumstances that call out for a better ending to their sad story. And every life is full of hints, and longings, and pointers to much more than this three score and ten can ever produce. And even if our lives could go on forever in the same old way this would, as the great theologian Karl Barth pointed out, become a kind of hell on earth of boredom and repetition. We were built for much more than this, and often in our better moments we know this. We are creatures who don't make sense if we are locked in to this finitude. We are creatures of the future, oriented towards a better world, and a never-ending exploration of the good God who made us.

But this isn't some thing that is just handed out with the rations. It is a possibility that we must take hold of, seize with both hands. The

gateway is baptism; the approach road is a developed Christian life. We need to want this kind of a personal future, and we don't get there by just being kind to the cat.

There are three paradoxes in the Christian life. God made the world, and all the creatures in it, including us, for the fun of it. God accepts each one of us, even in our sins and quirky oddities, on an as is where is basis. He can delight in even our failings and follies. Yet those who accept his call to follow him, and to be what human beings are meant to be when they live like his beloved child, find that they are required to live a life of utmost self-sacrifice.

Becoming a Christian isn't for the faint hearted. Yet when Simon Peter, and James and John, followed Jesus off that beach they were full of joy. For all the hard work, and the early deaths that were ahead of them, they had started living the life that really is life. And that brief span of years was only the beginning of the story. The trajectory they were now on would take them through hard places to the stars – they were destined to live with the beloved Son in his fully realised future world, the life of the world to come. This was the gospel of resurrection that they would preach – and so must we.