

A Fishy Story

Readings: Philippians chapter 2, verses 5-11 ; John chapter 21, verses 1-14

There are quite a few fishy stories in the Bible and this is one of them. The story itself bristles with a number of difficulties which are best dealt with in our Bible study group. But there is one thing which has always puzzled me. The story tells of a miraculous haul of fish and goes on to record the exact number of fish caught: 153 no less. Why 153? It is even more perplexing when you remember that the story is being written down at least 70 years after Jesus died. After that length of time you would expect the figure to be a round number – say 150 or 200.

No. 153 exactly. Which can only mean that the number has some significance. I have scoured the commentaries for some answers and they mostly come up with two alternatives. One is a mathematical symbolism which I can't get my head around; its all to do with triangular numbers. The other I can understand and it is consistent with other bits of the Gospel story.

It is this. In those days it was believed that the number of different species of fish was 153. In other words the total catch included every species of fish. Given that Jesus called the disciples to be "fishers of men" then this miraculous catch was sign and symbol of the Church's nature and the Church's mission. It is to be an all-inclusive and universal mission.

Consider the all-inclusive aspect first. The haul of fish, totalling 153, meant that every species was included. And, when you go to the other Gospels the teaching of Jesus is absolutely clear. The Good News is for everyone. You don't discriminate who you preach to. On one occasion Jesus told a story specifically to rebut any suggestion that the disciples should be selective in their approach. He said that the Kingdom of God is like a seine net which you throw into the sea and it traps fish of every kind in its mesh. Its not the same if you are fishing with a rod and reel. There is a different technique for catching trout or carp or salmon. Different bait. Different hook. You can be selective by that method. But if you throw a seine net into the sea you have got to take what it entraps and that means a variety of fish.

The Church, in proclaiming the Gospel, must not be selective. We must proclaim to anyone and everyone.

We have not always heeded that lesson. Years ago the Moral rearmament movement was popular and it made no bones about targeting people in power. They went for the politicians and the captains of industry on the grounds that if you can get them on board policies would change and everyone would benefit. Other churches have traditionally aimed at the working class. And others have targeted specific racial groupings. In the process all have missed a vital truth in Jesus' message. The proclamation of the gospel must be indiscriminate.

Equally, when people respond, we must be all inclusive in accepting them. That was the point of Jesus' story about letting the wheat and the weeds grow together until the harvest. Lots of people were very nervy about the kind of people Jesus welcomed into his fellowship; some of them had a notorious history. They were all for weeding out the baddies on the spot. And Jesus warned against premature judgements.

So that's the first point. The 153 fish represented an all-inclusive haul. And the nature of the Church ought to be all-inclusive as well. In naval terms not just those wearing acres of gold braid but ratings as well and everyone in between.

The second point is this. That total of 153 has the ring of universalism about it. And I think this is John's symbolic way of emphasising what the other gospels put in very prosaic terms. Apart from Mark's gospel (whose ending has been lost anyway) both Matthew and Luke have in their last words a universal commission.

- Matthew. "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all nations"
- Luke. "Repentance and forgiveness should be preached to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

John does give us a command of Jesus to preach world-wide. He gives us a story which makes exactly the same point. The 153 fish included every species known to man. Go fishing for men and make it a universal mission.

Again, it's a truth we are missing out on. Especially today. Increasingly these days I hear the argument that we should forget about sending missionaries overseas to preach the gospel. By all means send doctors and agriculturalists and educationalists. But not missionaries. The reason being that every nation has its own belief system and every belief system is equally true and equally valid. They have got their religion and we ought not to try and convert them.

It's a plausible argument and it sounds a very charitable and tolerant thing to do. But it completely undercuts and undermines a fundamental Christian belief. Namely, that God was in Christ; that Christ embodied what is ultimately true; that Christ is himself the Way, the Truth and the Life. If you believe that then how can you not evangelise?

All this needs spelling out and clarifying in a bit more detail and that's another sermon. But this needs to be emphasised. We are not out to convert people to Christianity. We are out to get them to commit to Christ and the two are not necessarily the same. There is much in Christianity which is un-Christlike.

So we are left with a fishy story. But it's a story which has huge symbolism and huge significance for the Church. 153 fish caught. Every known species hauled in.

And we who are called to be fishers of men ought never to forget that it is in the nature of the Gospel and the Church to be all-inclusive. And it is the mission of the Church to be universal. That's the challenge of this story for us today.

"Go, tell the followers of your Lord
 their Jesus is to life restored;
 He lives that they his life may find,
 he lives to quicken all mankind"