



FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY
6 February 2022

**We have to keep asking God
to help us see clearly what our call is
and to give us strength
to live out that call with trust.
Then we will discover that our faithfulness
to a small task is the most healing response
to the illnesses of our time.**

—Henri Nouwen

GATHERING

Invitation to Prayer—inspired by Psalm 138:1, 7–8

Though I may face many troubles,
I know I am sheltered by steadfast love.

For God is the keeper of promises;
and God's love endures forever.

May God be mindful of me—a masterpiece of my Creator;
surrounded by the Spirit of Christ,
my heart will give thanks forever.

Prayer

Author of pink sunrises and wide horizons:
Thank you for the gift of this time
in which I can pause and get in touch once again
with deep and important things.
In the hearing of your Gospel
may I recognise the eternal nature of your grace,
threaded through creation
and my very life.
Renew and strengthen my faith, I pray.
Amen

ENCOUNTERING THE LIVING WORD

Today's reading is a familiar one. The call of the fishers, heard every year in the Season after the Epiphany in the church, is included by all four gospel writers. But Luke's version is a bit different than the rest. Firstly, it comes later in Luke. Jesus has already launched his public ministry with teaching, healing and casting out unclean spirits. Also, there is an assumed relationship between Jesus and the fishers in Luke's telling. Jesus has been to Simon's house where he cured Simon's mother-in-law. Finally, this version includes details that appear in other places in some gospels. You might recognise Jesus' instructing the disciples to fish out in the deep waters, the large catch of fish following and Simon Peter's response. These elements make up a story at the end of John's gospel for instance.

As you prepare to read what is probably a familiar story, take a few moments to become aware of where you are right now in your journey with God. Do you feel close or distant? How are you feeling in yourself at this time? What are you bringing to this reading?

Open the ear of my heart, O God,
that I might hear the word you have for me this day.
Amen.

Scripture Reading—Luke 5:1–11

Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat.

When Jesus had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets."

When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So they signalled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who are partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

Personal Reflection

- What word or few words stand out for you at this time?
- What might the Spirit be saying to you in them? How do they speak into what is happening in your life right now?

Simon and the others have been out fishing without much success. I can imagine them feeling tired and weary as they wash their nets and pack up their supplies after a long night of fishing. No doubt they were looking forward to a nice, hot bath and a bite to eat before catching a few hours of sleep.

I suspect the weariness of the fishers is something with which we might identify. The near-constant feeling of alertness, the need to plan with the expectation that adaptation will likely be required, and the lack of assurance about when the impact of COVID will end has left us more than a little worn out.

And beyond the personal, churches (like all communities) are in this state of weariness as well. Mainline churches in Australia have been in decline for decades and the pandemic has sped this process along at a significant rate. Sometimes it can feel like we've been fishing all night—putting energy and resources into showing up and keeping church going—but rather than seeing the desired result, we find our communities in a state of depletion, fragility and dispiritedness.

Into this reality, Jesus tosses Simon a challenge: *Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.* Jesus' directive seems slightly out-of-touch with where the fishers are at and, from where I sit, my reaction would be a bit cranky and disbelieving if I were Simon. What? you must be kidding! It's already been a long night and now you want us to go out there again?!

This is, in fact, similar to Simon's initial response. But then he goes on to express what we might take to be a prayer of surrender and trust: *...if you say so, Jesus.* I don't know what you're up to... I can't see how it will work, but... *if you say so; I'll go where you ask me to go, do what you ask me to do.*

In Simon's prayer we hear a willingness to step beyond hesitation and, dare I say, resignation and laziness at times. We hear a willingness leave behind our attachment to what has always been and go to deeper places in order that we might serve God and embrace life more fully. It is a prayer we are invited to make ourselves.

By way of example, I would like to share something of my experience as a minister over these years and, in particular, how I've been invited to respond to Jesus in ways that have been stretching and transformative. I hope this sharing is not just an exercise in self-disclosure, but that you might recognise something of your own experience in it and that it might be instructive for the future.

Last week I stumbled across an email exchange I had with my then pastoral supervisor Brian Phillips from 2016. The email exchange was about a recent supervision session in which I was speaking with Brian about the many administrative responsibilities I was trying my best to manage. How might I help St. Andrew's keep the programs, properties and finances organised and coordinated, especially given our diminishing resources?

It seemed like we no sooner got something in place when an interpersonal change or hiccup would throw things into disarray which was requiring loads of pastoral and administrative attention.

I was becoming weary and my weariness was an indicator to us both of a needed redirection. But rather than suggesting a new, quick-fix program or structure we could implement, Brian wisely encouraged me to do what was essentially a metaphorical casting of my net into the deep. He invited me to focus less on the surface and more on the important things.

At its essence, the Christian life touches on things that *really matter* such as our relationship with God and others, the priorities we live out in our present and the desires that slowly give shape to our future. The surface stuff of life passes away. But below the surface flows the eternal riches of God and our attention to these things is where fruitful loving takes place.

What this might mean practically, gently offered Brian, is that I spend less time in the office planning, organising, managing and more time in the hall mingling with the community. “Eat your lunch at a table with someone,” he suggested. “Have a cup of tea with the volunteers in the kitchen. Sit quietly next to someone as they wait for food support.”

As easy and natural as these suggestions may sound now in 2020, at that time they brought tears to my eyes.

In looking back, I suspect my tears were likely multi-layered. They expressed anxiety at the uncertainty of what might happen if I started to relate and serve beyond just formal meetings and programs. They revealed a hesitancy to let go of activities and ways of being I had always known and which were largely expected by others. I feared letting people down and, most especially, the criticism that was likely to come if I didn't “fulfill all righteousness” when it came to the institution. And what would happen to St. Andrew's as an organisation if I shifted my focus?

More positively, my tears indicated a renewed vision in which I—and *the church*—could be freer, simpler and unencumbered. They were tears of relief and fresh vision. Now I am asking myself, and us, these kinds of questions:

What if hospitality, encounter and care flowed through a culture and ethos nurtured by our worship and prayer? What if we encouraged one another to follow the promptings of the Spirit, moving us to serve and love *as we will* rather than waiting for a meeting to be called, a program to take shape, or a roster to be formed?

Despite my emotional reaction at the time, Brian's encouragement to me that day to “put out into the deep” was a significant turning point—not just for myself as a minister but for every aspect of my life. God through Brian was calling me toward the possibility of relational, fruitful loving in the way of Jesus—a way of being that is personal, immanent and incarnational, that attends to things that truly matter.

To that end, I would like to make one final observation. Unique to Luke's telling of the call of the fishers is Simon's dramatic response when the net is pulled aboard. After putting out in the deep, the boat so full of fish, it begins to sink leaving no doubt in Simon's mind exactly who Jesus is. Such abundance can only be the work of God and, filled with amazement and humility, Simon responds by falling to his knees before Jesus.

It is my growing experience that this is the kind of heart and disposition the Spirit of Christ can work with.

Friends, I suspect the year ahead will be a formative one for all communities as the seeds planted by the pandemic take root and start to grow. May we hear Jesus' call to cast out in deep places not as more work to be done or an expectation that we put more effort in—especially into rescuing a dying institutionalism that for pilgrim people must always pass away. Instead, let us hear Jesus' call as a refreshing and hopeful redirection and refocus.

I pray we will have the courage to step, day-by-day with Christ into the future with a commitment to keep our eyes and hearts on the important, eternal things.

RESPONDING WITH OUR LIVES

Prayers of the People

Christ of fishers, common folk and longing searchers, throughout history you call and empower people to follow you into the deep, where eternal love flows and brings life. May we hear your call again and, by your Spirit, respond with small yet tangible acts of generosity, kindness and compassion. *In your mercy, hear our prayer.*

You call us to be peacemakers. And so we are disturbed by the threatening build-up of military along sovereign borders in Ukraine and images of civilians ready to defend through violent means. We weep for women, children and men in Syria whose lives are cut short by explosions of ideologies and the muscling of international powers. We are discouraged by sporting events coloured by human rights violations and political whitewash. Against these forces we feel helpless to live our calling in meaningful ways, and so, we ask that your Spirit might disarm the hearts and minds of all people, bringing change that leads to peace. *In your mercy, hear our prayer.*

You call us to be people of justice and compassion. Yet our lawmakers too often display self-concern if not duplicity and incompetence. With eyes set on election cycles and the need to please stakeholders and party rooms, our leaders seem unable at times to know or be led by truth and a concern for the well-being of all, especially those who are most vulnerable. Encourage and ennoble those leaders whose hearts are set on justice and may we encourage with our support. Increase in our country *and in each of us* the compassion of Christ. *In your mercy, hear our prayer.*

You call us to be the Body of Christ in this time and place. And so we pray for your Church in Australia and around the world. By your Spirit, you are present to the challenges your Church is facing, especially because of the scattering and stress caused by the COVID pandemic. Amidst the fatigue and anxiety, direct us to deep places of meaning and lasting grace. Encourage church leaders, hearten communities of faith, enliven our will to follow Jesus to places of self-giving service. *In your mercy, hear our prayer.*

Finally, you call us to be custodians of earth. Our home on this ancient land of fire and flood makes us all too aware of the human impact and neglect of creation and the need to make significant, global changes now. We pray for those who are suffering because of the climate crisis, here in Australia and in other places around the world. We pray for those who are assisting them in recovery and relocation. Heal us of our greed and indifference and heal your creation, O God. *In your mercy, hear our prayer.*

Disciples' Prayer

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.

Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,
now and forever. Amen

Blessing—from the Iona Community, adapted

Christ is within each of us and together we are the Church,
a temple not made with human hands.

If every wall should crumble, and every church decay,
we are the living Body of Christ.

Nearer is Christ than our breathing, closer than our hands and feet.
Ours are the eyes with which Christ looks out with compassion on the world.

So we give thanks for this time,
for God's directing of us,
for the Spirit's redeeming presence among us.

Now may Christ take us outside
where nations clash at the crossroads of the world.
We go to love in the way of Jesus.