

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

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Introduction

A nature miracle involving a large catch of fish might seem an unlikely story from which to glean things to help us when thinking about conflict and our approach to resolving it! However, as with so many of the Gospel stories, the text provides rich insights into human relational dynamics of various kinds and the interaction between Jesus and Peter offers us a couple of different lenses which might be useful for this task.

Preparation

Consider one or both of the following:

Have you ever wanted (for whatever reason) to get someone on the margins of something you were doing more closely involved? How did you go about it? Were the outcomes positive or negative? Can you analyse why your manoeuvres were successful or otherwise?

Can you recall a scenario in which you were asked to do something which either seemed totally unreasonable or which you felt was doomed to failure? How did you respond and why? What was the outcome and did it justify or overturn your initial response?

Text

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 he 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.

Comment

The first thing to notice as we read this text is the change of location for Jesus’ activities: hitherto, following his dramatic opening sermon in Nazareth, whenever Luke has mentioned Jesus teaching, it has always been in the synagogue (4: 33, 44). Now, for the first time, we are shown him teaching in the place of everyday working life – amongst the weary fishermen who are cleaning and mending their nets after a night of fruitless fishing. The text itself gives no direct explanation as to why Jesus decides to teach from a boat ‘a little way from the shore’ rather than find a suitable standing ground at the lakeside (it is certainly not a necessary pre-requisite to the subsequent miracle). But while the obvious answer is that it was the simplest way to escape the press of the crowd, another possibility is that it gives Jesus an opportunity to draw Simon into a different relational dynamic which then paves the way for a sequence which leads to life-changing consequences.

This is not Simon’s first encounter with Jesus which involves extraordinary happenings – in the previous chapter (Lk 4: 38–39) we have a story in which Jesus heals Simon’s mother-in-law who is desperately ill in the grip of a high fever. However it seems a reasonable assumption that this event was not followed by the sort of dramatic response from him which we see in v 8 of today’s Gospel reading. Whatever the primary motivation, Jesus’ actions in climbing into Simon’s boat and asking him to put out from the shore brings about a situation in which this time it is *Jesus* who is the dependant: he needs Simon’s skills and strength to manoeuvre the boat and maintain its position in order for him to be able to sit and teach the crowd.

So is there something here which can help us as we seek to develop a spirituality of conflict? Perhaps it might encourage us to think about how we engage with those who are also involved in the conflict situation: do we start from where people actually are in their everyday existence? Do we ask/expect people to do things which are outside their capabilities? Conversely do we allow ourselves to depend on/trust the skills and abilities of others to support us as we work with our areas of responsibility? Are we looking for ways in which to develop and strengthen relationships and understandings with those we work alongside in these situations?

Returning to the text – this initial action of Jesus in recruiting the specific help of Simon leads on to the second part of the story and to a more explicit series of interactions between the two. This sequence also provides a lens through which we can examine our responses to conflict situations.

Having acknowledged and relied on the skills and knowledge which were part of Simon's everyday working life, Jesus now asks him to do something which seems to totally disregard these! This request and Simon's response illustrate what William Barclay describes as 'the conditions of a miracle'*, and whatever we think about the nature of the miraculous, Barclay's analysis of the three key elements of this interaction is a helpful one in a wider sense as well.

Firstly there is what Barclay designates 'the eye that sees': whether we understand the appearance of the massive shoal as in some sense miraculous or not (such large shoals were a recognised phenomenon of Lake Gennaseret) is not critical here. What we can say is that both in getting into the boat and in later telling Simon to push out into the deep and lower his nets, Jesus sees and seizes an opportunity to change a situation: he brings Simon into a different connectational exchange from which to develop their embryonic relationship, and he reverses the fortunes of those who've toiled all night without reward.

Secondly there is the willingness to make an effort: Simon has been fishing all night, Jesus has been preaching to a large crowd and presumably both are fatigued and would like to get back to shore for some rest and refreshment. Instead though, both go on to something else: Jesus looks for and discerns the possibility of fish (in whatever way we want to understand this), and Simon takes his boat further out and puts down the nets once again (perhaps also having first had to put back in and gather up the nets which were being worked on at the start of the story). Again Luke does not spell out exactly why Simon complies – perhaps he has been watching Jesus keep going in the face of weariness (which we know from the gospel stories was a common consequence of his ministry) and this calls forth a similar response from him; perhaps he feels he owes something to Jesus for healing a close relative; perhaps it's a complex mixture of reasons – we don't know. What we do see though is that Simon is prepared to keep going for a bit longer in response to Jesus' request.

Finally there's the spirit to attempt something which seems, on the face of it, to be a hopeless undertaking. Simon is an experienced fisherman and all his instincts tell him that putting out now, in daylight, to the place indicated, won't bring any reward – otherwise he would have already be out there doing it. However, and again though we're not told precisely why we might reasonably infer that it is something he has seen or heard through this encounter with Jesus, he agrees to give it a go and the rest, as they say, is history! This time the extraordinary calls forth a profound and life changing response from Simon – but he has needed to travel down a different pathway in order for that to happen.

Once again these elements of the story are ones which we can use to reflect on different aspects of how we deal with conflict (on whatever scale) in which we are involved. Firstly how can we develop a more 'seeing eye': what things might help us to look up/out/further and perhaps see opportunities and openings which could lead to a change in dynamics or open up different possibilities for making progress towards resolution?

Secondly what attitudes or habits of life and devotion can we cultivate which will help us (and others around us) to persevere even in the face of discouragement or weariness?

Finally how do we make judgements on possible courses of action, especially when these seem counterintuitive or doomed to failure? What are we willing to attempt in our efforts to foster greater understanding or move towards resolution or healing of divisions?

Choose one or more of the suggested areas of reflection and examine it more closely – perhaps in the framework of a particular area of conflict (whether great or small, public or private) in which you are currently or have been recently involved.

It might be helpful to make a list of specific things you want to try and do in the light of your further reflection – perhaps working at deepening your knowledge and understanding of a situation, developing skill sets (your own and others), or cultivating/nurturing certain habits or attitudes. You might want to then think about and investigate ways in which you could get – or give – training or support – both formal and informal – in these efforts.

Prayer

Jesus –
our close and constant companion of the Way –

When we need help and support,
grace us with the humility to ask;

When change is needed,
grant us the vision of a seeing eye;

When we are weary or discouraged,
gift us the strength to go on;

When the road you call us to seems to lead nowhere –
give us the courage to make the attempt.
Amen