Sermon 10 Feb 2019 Southwell Minster

Canon Angela Ashwin

Launch out into deep water

Luke 5: 1-11; Isaiah 6: 1-8

'Put out into the deep water,' says Jesus to Simon Peter in today's Gospel; or, as older versions put it, 'Launch out into the deep!'

 I really don't like deep water, either when swimming, or in a small boat. I remember once when Vincent and I lived in Southern Africa we went on holiday to what is now Zimbabwe, and we visited a large dam where they had rowing boats for hire. Vincent, having been an experienced rower at university, was keen to take me out in one of these boats. So off we went, and he rowed and rowed for ages. But unfortunately (and I have asked his permission to tell you this) the harder he rowed the more the distant shore seemed to recede! So there we were, in the middle of this vast expanse of undoubtedly deep water, and I was extremely scared! Of course we got back perfectly safely, but I do still remember it!

 Deep water features in today's Gospel, and I find it fascinating that here, as in many Biblical stories, there are several layers of meaning and symbolism. First there is the immediate action and drama, as Jesus suggests to Simon (who is of course Peter) that he take his boat into the deep centre of the Sea of Galilee - or Gennesaret as it's called here - in order to fish.

 Then there is the symbolism of the huge catch of fish that Peter ends up with, and this stands for all those people who will be caught up in the love and mercy of God through Jesus' ministry in which Peter will play a vital part.

 And then there's a third layer of meaning, which is concerned with the significance of the deep water itself. In the Biblical tradition, seas and oceans represent danger and the primeval chaos which needs the strong hand of our Creator God to restore order, calm and safety.

 So the deep water into which Peter is now being encouraged to go symbolises the very real depths of challenge and conflict into which his life as a disciple of Jesus will certainly lead him. And through all that he will depend on the presence and power of Jesus to hold and sustain him.

 And for us too, if we take seriously our own calling to follow Christ, we are likely at some point to find ourselves in difficult waters. But, like Peter, we are reassured by Jesus who says, 'Do not be afraid.' Because Christ is with us - blessing our efforts, making good our mistakes and never abandoning us.

 As this story circulated in the early Church, it must have been a great encouragement to those who were facing hardship and persecution then. And it has continued to give hope and courage to Christians ever since.

 So then, looking in more detail at this splendid scene on the Sea of Galilee, I love the gentle humour here: when Jesus suggests that Peter should go and fish in deeper waters, Peter replies, 'Actually, Master, we were toiling away the whole night, and there simply aren't any fish around at the moment!' You can imagine him thinking: 'Yes he's a wonderful man but he doesn't know the first thing about fishing! But I suppose we'd better humour him!'

 So off they go, and, as we know, they take such an enormous catch of fish that they need help to get it back to land. And now Peter feels completely overwhelmed and unworthy, and responds in his typically passionate way: 'Depart from me, Lord, I am a sinful man!' But Jesus immediately reassures him, 'Don't be afraid.' It's as if he is saying to Peter, Yes, you are a sinner, like everybody else, but that's not going to stop me asking you to be my friend and companion - as a fisher of people!' So Peter and the other fishermen leave everything behind, and set off into the unknown with Jesus. And talk about jumping in at the deep end! Because Jesus' whole ministry will turn out to be revolutionary, as he constantly reaches across barriers, heals on the Sabbath, frees people from prejudice, legalism and unnecessary guilt, and offends loads of people in the process, especially the religious authorities!

 I suspect that many Christians today would say that following Jesus is not always easy or comfortable now either. Certainly discipleship opens up for us new life, purpose, and a peace that nothing else can give. But at the same time there is what the theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer calls

 'the cost of discipleship', and we may well feel isolated or unnerved at times. I'm reminded of the old prayer of the Breton fisherman, 'O God, your sea is so great, and my boat is so small.'

 It can be hard to be a Christian now, in our society where religious faith is often treated with scorn or apathy. You can find yourself, for example, at a social gathering and be having a great time until suddenly the conversation turns to religion, and then maybe people start laughing at the church, or writing us off as hypocrites and bigots. What do we do? It's tough and can feel like very deep water. Are we going to let on that we go to church? Or are we going to try and explain that there's so much more to Christianity than narrow judgementalism. This sort of situation can take us way out of our comfort zone; but in a way we shouldn't be surprised, because Jesus does warn us that following him can be difficult as well as wonderful. 'Take up your cross,' he says, 'and follow me.'

 Those sayings of his that we call the Beatitudes seem to confirm this mixture of blessedness and cost. For example, Jesus says, 'Blessed are the peacemakers.' Yes, but, peace-making can make us vulnerable, and if we're trying to understand two opposing points of view we can end up getting mangled in the middle!

 Or again, 'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,' says Jesus. Anyone who has spoken out against injustice or oppression will know that there can be a backlash to this, and we can get hurt. Much easier to hide in the corner and not get involved at all. But then something in us would shrink, and we'd be less alive rather than more so. I often think about some words I once saw on a poster:

*A boat is safe in the harbour; but that's not what boats are for.*

 There's also another kind of 'going into deep water with God' that I want to reflect on this morning, and this is about what happens whenever we are praying or worshipping. At such times we are plunging into the deep waters of God's loving and mysterious presence. And this is what was happening to the prophet Isaiah in our O.T. reading, during that extraordinary vision that he had one day in the Jerusalem Temple. Just when incense was being offered in the sanctuary, Isaiah was suddenly plunged into a sense of God's awesome majesty and holiness surrounding and enfolding him. This experience was heightened by the strange angelic creatures or 'seraphim' singing, 'Holy, Holy, Holy.' And of course we hear these words too, in the 'Sanctus' or 'Holy, holy,' that comes as part of our Eucharistic prayer. And when this song of the seraphim is said or sung, we too are being offered a glimpse of the divine mystery, when eternity intersects with time. The trouble is, it's so easy to be distracted and not fully present in heart and mind, that this moment can pass us by. But it's there all the same!

 And apart from church services, wheneverwe are praying, whether with words or in stillness (but perhaps especially in quiet prayer), we are again plunging into the vast ocean of the grace of God, and we can trust him even when we are not sure exactly what's going on. You've probably heard the story of the little fish that asks its mother, 'Where is the sea?' And his mother tells him that the sea is all round him and in him, and his life depends on it, just as we 'live and move and have our being in God' (to quote St Paul in Acts 17.) This is the God whose presence is always with and around us and whose life flows through us because he is the source of all life and holds us in being at every moment.

 It would take another whole sermon to do justice to the richness and depths of meaning in our O.T. passage describing Isaiah's experience in the Temple. Today I just want briefly to highlight a few interesting and significant parallels between Isaiah's story and that of Peter on the lake.

 First, both Peter and Isaiah are overwhelmed and amazed when they encounter the divine in an unexpected way.

 Secondly, they both react by feeling totally unworthy and are somehow fearful that they could ever be useful or acceptable to God.

 But then, crucially, they are both reassured that they are forgiven and God can still use them.

 And finally there is healing and new life for both of them because now they are given a job to do. In spite of all their flaws, God calls them, as he calls us.

 So, to conclude, even if we do find ourselves navigating deep or tricky waters when we are trying to serve God, he will never ask of us more than we can give, and we will always be immersed in his loving and sustaining presence.

 I'd like to finish by reading a short extract from a book entitled 'Ways of Loving' by the Anglican monk, Fr Simon Holden. He was a dear friend of mine, and actually died last week. He writes:

*'When those we love have died, the love between us moves into a deeper quality, so that we are bonded together in a more profound experience of the ocean of God's love. The ones we love, but see no longer, swim further into the mystery of God, who is love.'*

*Thanks be to God.*