

Put Out into the Deep

a sermon preached on the
2nd Sunday before Lent

Sunday 7 February 2010
at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

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Lecton: Isaiah 6:1-3, 1 Corinthians 15:1-11, Luke 5:1-11

If we were asked to summarise in as few words as possible the essence of religious instruction to children, how might we characterise it? I think it would be something like this: 'Be nice!' Or, slightly more technical and with a few more words: 'Because God loves you, you must be kind you to others.' That's not a bad teaching, of course, and God knows the world could do with more people being kind to each other. And it's certainly a useful life instruction for children and adolescents.

But immediately questions arise. Is this really the *essence* of Christian faith? And is this instruction adequate for *life beyond adolescence*? While it would be a brave claim to know, definitively, what *the* essence of Christian faith is – nevertheless the wealth of Christian reflection down the centuries certainly indicates that Christian faith involves a great deal more than being nice, than moral perfection. Equally, there's no shortage of contemporary evidence to indicate that this 'be nice' instruction is hardly adequate to the complexity and ambiguity of life beyond adolescence.

I was well schooled in how to 'be nice', both at home and at the school I attended for 11 years. Later, when I began to turn to Christ, I attempted to make myself acceptable to God and the church community by proving myself by moral and ethical action, by 'super niceness'! Of course it goes without saying that I couldn't reach moral perfection - but I did try! Then, thwarting the upward movement of my life, in a completely unexpected development when I was 25, the wheels of ethical perfection fell off, the axle of good works snapped. Suddenly, I found myself plummeting downward into a depth about which I was to that point completely ignorant. This, I eventually came to understand, is the essential movement of the soul. Moreover, it is a movement which happens again and again throughout life.

Like Peter and the other disciples, we have laboured 'all night' striving to practice the ethical and moral life we were taught as children. A point is reached when this yields nothing new, no further development of consciousness – no 'fish'! At a certain point, and for unfathomably-complex reasons, according to the uniqueness of our genetics and experience, we are called away from what we know, from the surface detail of our lives: "Put out into the deep."¹ This is not our idea of a good time! The deep is unfathomable, dark, treacherous, symbolically representing the antithesis of our control over life – all those novels and science fiction stories about the terrifying mysteries at the depths of the oceans spring to mind. Psychologically, the deep is the opposite of ego-consciousness, beyond the control of reason and our self-promoted image of our selves. The deep can be commonly experienced in dreams and nightmares. Or external events may plunge us into the deep. Religious ritual, at its best, is meant to safely put us in touch with the deep. In each of these three ways we are taken to a place we do not want, would not choose, which terrifies us, and in which we may feel as though we are losing our grip on life.

Indeed, we are losing our grip - and that is the very point! Simon Peter and James and John are terrified by what they encounter in the deep – not because they don't want any more fish, but because the scale of the catch reveals the one-sidedness and limitation of their rational ego control over their lives. Peter rightly describes himself as a sinful man² – the same state as the prophet Isaiah in his vision – for he has claimed to know far too much, and has been confronted by the terror and enormity of what he does not know, of the

¹ Luke 5:4b

² Luke 5:8b

deep. Peter *must* lose his grip, his ego-driven attempt to control and construct his world. Only an encounter with the deep is capable of stripping away the inflated claim of ego. It is the same stripping of ego which Isaiah the “man of unclean lips”³ experiences in his vision. Likewise, it is what arrests the ego-centric aspirations of Saul that ‘Pharisee of Pharisees’ such that he can describe himself as one “unfit to be an apostle” but as “one untimely born”.⁴

Now it is important to note that it is not Peter or Isaiah or St Paul who devise their own clever plan to ‘put out into the deep’. Rather, it is the ‘Lord of Hosts who fills the earth with glory’.⁵ It is the holy child, the Son of God Jesus who is ‘anointed by the Spirit of the Lord’.⁶ It is the risen and ascended ‘Jesus who you are persecuting’.⁷ We make impressive mission statements and feel very pleased with ourselves - God calls us instead into the deep! Like Jesus driven by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested, it is the Other, the *Mysterium Tremendum*, the Ground of Being, who calls us, invites us, and sometimes has to force us into the deep. The deep is revealed to us in nightmares and visions, and when we refuse to attend, preferring unconsciousness, the deep may be revealed to us through external events which derail our ego-driven plans and bring us up short.

And of course - like Simon Peter and Isaiah and Paul, and all the rest - we are instinctively afraid of the deep. For in the deep we are quite literally out of our depths. In the waters of the Divine Mystery we are well and truly over our heads. And so the *εὐαγγέλιον* *evangelion*, the evangel, the good news, speaks precisely into this state of affairs: “Do not be afraid!”⁸ “Your guilt is blotted out.”⁹ “By the grace of God I am what I am.”¹⁰ By the very means of entering into the deep waters of death, as the baptismal rite claims, willingly putting out into the deep according to the Lord’s call, thus we will come to life. It is only by the encounter with the deep that Isaiah has something worthwhile to declare to Israel. It is only by encounter with the deep that Paul becomes worthy to be called an apostle. It is only by encounter with the deep that Simon Peter and the others become capable of catching people alive.

Remember, any religious salesman can catch people in a way that infantilises, trading away the higher responsibility of becoming fully alive in exchange for a mere religious trinket – just as any salesperson can sell stuff to people who don’t really need it, and which simply reinforces dependence on consumerism and materialism. Only by putting out into the deep, however, can we come to assist others to come to the fullness of life in the Divine Mystery.

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3 Isaiah 6:5
4 1 Corinthians 15:9b, 8
5 Isaiah 6:6
6 Luke 1:35b, 4:18
7 Acts 9:5
8 Luke 5:10b
9 Isaiah 6:7
10 1 Corinthians 15:10