

## Labor and Toil

### 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity

Luke 5:1 – 11

#### *Jesus Calls the First Disciples*

*1On one occasion, while the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he was standing by the lake of Gennesaret, 2and he saw two boats by the lake, but the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. 3Getting into one of the boats, which was Simon's, he asked him to put out a little from the land. And he sat down and taught the people from the boat. 4And when he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch." 5And Simon answered, "Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets." 6And when they had done this, they enclosed a large number of fish, and their nets were breaking. 7They signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink. 8But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." 9For he and all who were with him were astonished at the catch of fish that they had taken, 10and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. And Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men." 11And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him.*

Fishing was a tough profession in those days. A fisherman had to be familiar not only with the treacherous nature of the lake but also with the government regulations; like today, fishermen back then had to pay taxes and license fees to the Romans and negotiate fishing rights with them. Moreover, it was a grueling trade—one that Cicero described as among the most contemptible of all—likely because fishermen constantly smelled bad. Peter, James, and John had formed a sort of fishing cooperative so they could face these various hardships together. What they did not know was that all three would later become part of Jesus' inner circle of disciples. For Jesus chose this very group of smelly fishermen to be his closest associates. The calling of these three key disciples is therefore of special significance for the Church as a whole, showing us how we, as Christians and followers of Jesus, can live and work.

Indeed, the story of Jesus calling the disciples while they were fishing reveals three aspects that remain relevant for us as the Church today:

- We face great labor and toil
- Our work stands firm when based on his Word
- The journey with Jesus holds surprising turns

1. In the first part of the story, Jesus steps into the boat—into the everyday reality of the fisherman's life. He sits in Peter's boat, witnessing firsthand the harshness and lack of success inherent in the trade. While the fishermen sat on the shore, inspecting and mending their empty nets, Jesus preached from the boat. Fishing work was typically done in a cove, meaning the lake and the shore formed an excellent auditorium with superb acoustics for Jesus' sermon. The fact that Jesus stepped into Peter's boat and preached so naturally suggests that Peter may have already been familiar with Jesus. In fact, He was not only well-known but also respected, for he had previously healed Peter's mother-in-law of a severe illness. As Jesus was preaching and the fishermen were mending their empty nets, He suddenly addressed them directly. This time, there was no sermon, but rather a very practical piece of advice: they were to leave everything as it was and go fishing once more. Peter immediately raised objections, using the familiar words: "We have toiled and labored all night long, yet caught nothing." Interestingly, Paul picks up this Greek word used by Peter—\*kopiaō\*, which describes the act of working—and subsequently uses it to describe church work itself. It has thus become a term within the church, illustrating how the work of the church actually unfolds: with great toil and labor, and with empty nets. I believe we have all had this experience of empty nets at some point. We all know the frustration that arises when our initiatives meet with little response, or when the entire workload falls upon a mere handful of people who must slave away. People who, in the process, grow weary and ask themselves: Why should we keep going at all when the whole enterprise is heading for disaster anyway? Much of what we do defies common sense. Consequently, there is always a strong temptation to trim our sails to the prevailing winds of the times or to follow our own instincts—paths where, from a human perspective, things run much more smoothly and with fewer complications. It seems to me that the church must constantly relearn not to rely on the stratagems of human reason, but rather on the One who is sitting in the boat with us: Jesus. And what He asks of us goes far beyond all our toil and drudgery—indeed, beyond our knowledge and capabilities. He calls upon us to place our trust in His creative Word.

2. On the day of his calling, Peter stands at a crucial crossroads. Based on his human knowledge, he really ought to say: "It may well be that you, Jesus, are an expert carpenter, since that is the trade you learned. But \*I\* am the fisherman here, not you, and for all the goodwill in the world, it makes no sense to go fishing again in broad daylight!" Yet Peter does not do this; instead, despite all objections, he says: "At your word, I will do what you say." Between the phrase "At your word" and the preceding statement "We have fished all night without success" stands a small but weighty word: "but." This "but" runs like a common thread through the entire Bible. It is the "but" of faith, which places two realities side by side without denying either of them. On one side stands the harsh reality of everyday life, which seems to contradict the Word of God: empty nets, exhausted people, a night of fruitless toil. On the other side stands God's Word—unassuming and quiet, yet powerful. The psalmist knows this "but" from his own experience. In Psalm 73, he initially describes the spiritual struggle unsparingly. He states it bluntly: the godless prosper, the righteous suffer, and faith seems to yield no reward. And then, right in the midst of this lament, comes the turning point: "Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand." (Ps 73:23). And deeper still: "My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever." (Ps 73:26). This is the same "but" we see with Peter. Not a "but" born of naivety that explains away the difficulty, but a "but" born of trust—one that acknowledges the difficulty yet places its hope in God. Paul, too, knows this "but." In 2 Corinthians 4:8–9, he writes: "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed." It is the same pattern of faith: the reality of failure and the reality of God—both true, both existing side by side, with God having the final word.

From this "but," we learn what the Church lives by. The Church does not live by a succession of successful projects. Nor does it live by emulating this or that philosophy, scientific theory, or human stratagem; rather, it lives by the Word of Jesus—a Word that, quietly and unobtrusively, works miracles among a band of foul-smelling fishermen. This Word of Jesus is the true miracle of the entire story—the one that transforms everything else and eclipses it all. Without the miracle of Jesus' Word, the Church cannot exist. No matter how successful it may appear, if it is without Jesus' Word—or attempts to be so—it is not truly alive.

When Peter said, "At your word," he made a confession intended to hold true for all time. In doing so, he shows that we in the Church cannot do without this Word of God. This Word is not our word. It is the Word that stands behind all existence in creation. It is also the Word that called us into being as the Church. Nothing more is required of us than simply to listen to this Word of our Lord and to follow it. From his experience as a fisherman, Peter knows that it makes absolutely no sense to cast the nets during the day, for that is when the fish are in the depths of the lake. Yet when he does so anyway, he is not relying on his fishing expertise, but on the word of the Lord Jesus, who works miracles.

3. However, the story holds further surprising turns. The turning point is not that the fishermen return home with full nets and lead a carefree life from then on. That is only one side of the story. The truly surprising turn—the one that changes everything else—is this: Peter makes a second confession, one of vital importance for us as the Church: "When Simon Peter saw this, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, 'Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.'" From this confession, we see that Peter acknowledges not only that Jesus is Lord; he also realizes that he himself has no business being near such a Lord. "I am a sinful man!" In that moment, Peter experiences the presence of God Himself through Jesus. And he immediately grasps the impossibility of it: God and man side by side—in the same boat, so to speak? It cannot be! Not according to the understanding of that time, nor for us today. Something has to give. And so Peter says, "You must go away! Your glory and my humanity cannot coexist!" Jesus does not contradict Peter. He knows that Peter is a sinner. He knows all his faults. The miracle is that Jesus says to him, "I am by your side nonetheless. I stand by you, despite your sinfulness!" And this is a miracle that has remained within the Church. Jesus did not merely dine with sinners; He also commissioned people just like them to be His messengers. We, the messengers in the Church, are not sinners who have simply become pious; in our very nature, we remain sinners. Yet the miracle is that Jesus steps into the boat with us and works in, with, and through such people nonetheless.

Peter, John, and James received a calling on the day of their greatest success. They were to leave everything behind and follow Jesus. They were to become fishers of men—Luke makes it clear that, instead of fish, they would catch living human beings. They did all this willingly. For three years, they stood by Jesus' side and learned from Him. Afterward, they did not say, "Thank You, Jesus; now we know everything and can carry on alone." No, quite the opposite. They would always rely on His Word. They would be unable to work without this Jesus who sits in the boat with them. Time and again, they would stand before Him as flawed sinners. Yet, time and again, acting on His Word, they would go where—from a human perspective—it seemed impossible. Amen.