

Fifth Sunday After Trinity

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While the Bible may have a reputation for verbosity, we are often struck by the Gospel writers' economy of words and occasional understatement. In today's Gospel reading, St. Luke tells us that "the people pressed upon [Jesus] to hear the Word of God..." (Luke 5:1).

What must it have been like for Our Lord during His ministry? I imagine Him being mobbed like the Beatles in *A Hard Day's Night*, perhaps more so since His fan-base would have been much broader. St. John Chrysostom reflected on this:

For they clung to Him, loving Him, and marvelling at Him, and longing to stay with Him. And who would leave while He was working such wonders? For He was wondrous not alone in His miracles; His countenance overflowed with grace.^[1]

How can we begin to imagine the charisma of the incarnate creator of the universe? Whenever He revealed Himself to teach, managing the crowd must have been a significant problem.

In this instance, on the shore of Lake Genesareth, also known as the Sea of Galilee, He employs one of two nearby fishing boats, to get some separation from the multitudes and to take advantage of the acoustics on the water. Simon, whose ship He commandeered, would presumably have recognized Jesus who had entered his home some time before and healed his mother in law of a fever (Luke 4:38). In any case, he stepped right up and followed Jesus' instructions to "draw back a little from the land" so He could teach from the boat.

Later, the teaching done, Simon hesitates only briefly when Jesus tells him to "Launch out into the deep, and let down your nets for a draught."

^[1] Chrysostom, in *The Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers*, ed. and trans. M. F. Toal, vol 3 (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1958), 214

"Master," he answers respectfully, "we have toiled all the night, and have taken nothing; nevertheless, at thy word I will let down the net." The professional fisherman, having already spent the night, a much better time for it, fishing without success, nonetheless follows the advice of someone he has no objective reason to believe knows much about it.

The results are immediate and staggering: the net is filled to breaking and Simon's partners and their boat must be called upon for assistance. Together, it's all they can do to secure the bountiful catch without sinking both ships.

Theophany is defined as an appearance of the Deity in a visible and tangible form. It is, by all accounts, a profoundly humbling experience. Now Simon was occasionally known to be a bit of a knucklehead, opinions vary. Say what you will about him, he knew a theophany when he saw it.

In this moment only within the passage, St. Luke refers to him as Simon Peter, telling us he spontaneously falls to Jesus' knees exclaiming, "Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord." An encounter with God elicited a similar response from Isaiah: "Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts." (Isaiah 6:5)

What are we to make of this story? First, let's acknowledge that to call it a story detracts from its importance not one bit. It's the nature of all the Gospels to be eye witness accounts of events, we believe this to have actually happened. But God spoke all of us and the world we inhabit into existence, everything that happens is a story told by God and suffused with meaning. Of course the very real, historical events, the characters, the stories, surrounding His time among us on earth are intentionally, particularly rich with meaning. The dazzling variety of it is something for which I, faced with the expectations of my brothers and sisters to regularly have something interesting to say about it, am extremely thankful.

Today, let's consider an observation made by Bishop Robert Barron, the well-known, Roman Catholic Internet Evangelist. In his essay, "Jesus Getting Into Your Boat,"^[2] which appears in the *Word On Fire* study Bible, he finds in this story a symbolic depiction of what he calls "the invasion of grace."

Simon's boat represents his worldly life: his expertise, the tools of his trade, and a significant part of his material wealth. As the preacher of Ecclesiastes so poetically conveys in our Old Testament lesson, "I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do: and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 2:11). We work, we have success, we make our living and support ourselves and our families. Yet we're never satisfied for long. We can't shake the feeling we're

^[2] Robert Barron, in *The Word On Fire Bible: The Gospels*, ed. Brandon Vogt, (Park Ridge, IL: The Word On Fire Ministries, 2020), 330.

missing the point. We long for something more that we always seem not quite able to achieve. For Simon that day, the elusive thing we all long for and strive for but can't even describe, let alone get for ourselves, simply stepped right into his boat.

We can assume Simon was getting along "Ok" as a fisherman. But in response to Jesus' word and by faith in it, he launches into the deep in defiance of conventional wisdom and finds success beyond anything ordinarily possible. God wants to be in our lives, not to eclipse us, but to enhance and perfect us. We need His invasion of grace in order to be our true selves, what He created us to be.

Jesus tells Simon, "from henceforth thou shalt catch men" which anticipates his evangelism and the founding of the Church. He and the sons of Zebedee "forsook all and followed Him." On this point Nicholas Perrin notes in his commentary on Luke's Gospel, "the test of true repentance and discipleship is a willingness to hold loosely one's worldly goods."^[3] I'm happy to observe this doesn't necessarily imply utter poverty. We notice Jesus did not say Simon would never fish again. In fact St. John's Gospel relates that much later another fruitless night of fishing for Simon Peter, the sons of Zebedee, and a few other Apostles is followed by the resurrected Christ reprising the miraculous catch of fish. (John 21:3) That provides a nice book end to Peter's journey of formation in discipleship, leading to the full realization of his own ministry.

So here I am beginning my own ministry. In no way do I mean to compare myself with Saint Peter, this is just me making a rather clumsy transition to introducing myself as your new Deacon. Father Kurt suggested it might be appropriate to relate something about my faith-journey. I pray I don't give him or you reason to regret that.

In one way, I am if you'll allow me to say it, similar to Simon: Profoundly humbled, both by God's calling me to this office, and by your acceptance and confidence in me. It's tempting to fall to my knees right here and proclaim "I am a sinful man!" but I'll spare you that! Not because I haven't been missing the mark with impressive consistency for much of my life, but because I suspect Father Kurt would find that an overly dramatic statement of the obvious. Also, I'd surely be comically wound up in these vestments.

By now you all know me, and my wife Julie, fairly well. But I doubt many of you know just how late in life I came to my faith. My mother made sure my sister and I were baptized, but we never attended church regularly when I was growing up. By the time I got to college, my child-like faith, which I now understand to have been a precious thing, was supplanted by childish conformity with the new atheists.

^[3] Nicholas Perrin, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, ed. Eckhard J. Schnabel, vol. 3 (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 1988), 97.

We all have a conscience and, therefore, an innate sense there is objective truth at least in matters of morality. If you don't reject that but do reject God, and you fancy yourself an intellectual, there is bound to be some philosophical hand-waving. For me, that was Ayn Rand's Objectivism which purports to explain absolute truth in terms of human reason. It almost works with a lot of effort. But in practice you get a lot of people who don't really understand it holding up their copies of *Atlas Shrugged* in support of really bad ideas. Now misappropriation does not in itself condemn something. But Objectivism takes human reason as a given and assumes its origin is irrelevant. In that way it's explicitly atheistic and thereby falls into one of the inevitable traps set for all materialist philosophies. It has no coherent basis for valuing human life. Which leads even the "good" objectivist to support, for example, the most radical forms of euthanasia and abortion. So there were aspects of Objectivism I struggled to square with my conscience. Nonetheless, it did comport well with my conservative leanings: Ayn Rand was a famous capitalist apologist, proponent of freedom and hater of collectivism in all its forms. I wrestled it into my worldview for many years.

Five years ago, I was consuming a fair bit of internet commentary. Several of the folks I followed regularly were coming at things from a Judaeo-Christian point of view. As I think we all were and are, I was quite concerned about social, cultural, and dare I say? Political, developments. These guys who weren't shy about their religion seemed to be pretty well-equipped to oppose the moral relativism that is obviously the root cause of our distress. So I was already coming around to the idea there is a spiritual component to our problems.

And then the great Dennis Prager had a guest on his weekly Fireside Chat: Craig Biddle, one of the foremost contemporary proponents of Objectivism and founder of an institute promoting the same. For anyone curious about this philosophy and how a believer responds to it, it's a very illuminating hour and twenty minutes: Fireside Chat Episode 174. For me it was the final push toward a spiritual overhaul.

I've always been in awe of America's founding documents, especially the pithy Declaration whose 250th anniversary we just celebrated yesterday. Part of my process was entertaining the possibility that "endowed by their Creator" is more than a handy metaphor.

I was, of course, familiar with C. S. Lewis, but had not been aware of his Christian Apologetics until several different people recommended it to me around this time. I read and was moved by *Mere Christianity* and *Surprised by Joy*. The former is a brilliant, complete, and succinct outline of what a Christian believes. But one passage in particular put the stake through the heart of my Objectivism.

But a Christian must not be either a Totalitarian or an Individualist. I feel a strong desire to tell you---and I expect you feel a strong desire to tell me---which of these two errors is the worse. That is the devil getting at us. He always sends errors into the world in pairs---pairs of opposites. And he always encourages us to spend a lot of time thinking which is the worse. ... He relies on your extra dislike of the one error to draw you gradually into the opposite one.^[4]

It also changes, by the way, your perspective on the political polarization that's going on.

Learning of the conversation in which the devoutly faithful Tolkien suggested to Lewis that the story of Christ works in the same way as the myths he so loved, with the singular difference that it really happened, prompted my final step. The idea of Scripture as true myth, changed the way I read the Bible which ultimately led me to Christ.

We sought out an Anglican church because that was Lewis' denomination. Deacon Ron Reno, whom some of you met at the ordination, welcomed us into St. John the Baptist Anglican Church where he eventually was our catechist. I developed an immediate fondness for the Book of Common Prayer. The service at which I first took Communion happened to be Septuagesima which has for the Gospel Reading Matthew 20, the parable of the labourers in the vineyard. That seemed so appropriate: I identify, of course, with the final group hired.

It must be made clear that this is simply how the events that moved me appeared to me at the time. It's tempting to credit Prager, Jefferson, Lewis, and Cranmer (or myself for seeking them out) with my conversion. But they are just part of the particular shape taken by the gift of God's grace in my life. The work is all His for which I cannot be thankful enough. In the words of our Hymn of Preparation: "Jesus call us! By thy mercies, Saviour, make us hear thy call, Give our hearts to thine obedience, Serve and love thee best of all."

AMEN.

^[4] C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Harper Collins, 1980), 186.