

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 5 Year C 2022

The fuller celebration for the Queen's Platinum Jubilee will, as mentioned (on more than one occasion now!) of course occur tonight. 70 years ago today, the 25 year-old princess Elizabeth ascended the throne on the death of her father King George VI. For people of faith, we are not just celebrating an impressive anniversary. We are obeying that sometimes-difficult injunction to pray *'for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence'* as the writer to Timothy puts it. But we are also celebrating a life of remarkable Christian witness. The Queen's own personal faith we know to be profound and sincere. She has understood her office as God-given and her devotion to duty as a Christian vocation. Throughout her long reign she has on numerous occasions had cause to reference her faith and to explain her commitment to Jesus Christ, and how she has sought to shape her life after his pattern and example.

But what is remarkable about Her Majesty the Queen is, in many ways, her *un*-remarkableness. In many ways she is a very ordinary woman. Short in stature. She never went to school, much less university. She has never held an 'ordinary job' as we would understand it. And, in fact, there is not much in the way we would call 'wide experience.' And though we could never call her 'common', it is common, human pleasures that speak to her the most. Biographers tells us she is most comfortable amongst her dogs and horses like many country women of a certain type. Past the jewels and hats and dresses, past the big and grand houses, past the state banquets and golden carriages there is a simple woman with a simple faith. But this ordinariness and this simplicity has *not* prevented her from fulfilling her God-given duty.

The very same is an important principle that plays out throughout Scripture. Limitations, ordinariness and simplicity, failings and foibles, do not prevent God from working amongst his people. Indeed, it appears to be a peculiar preference of God that he actually favours the common and the ordinary. It is amongst the most unlikely, the most unremarkable and the most unsure of themselves that God selects to cooperate with him. This very dynamic we see at play in all the scripture readings placed before us today. There is common motif coming from all the key characters in today's readings: *"I'm not very good at this. I'm not worthy. I don't think this is working."* And so we hear, *"Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips!"* from Isaiah. *"I am the least of the apostles,"* Paul

says, “*Unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.*” And from Peter, “*Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing*”... “*Leave me Lord, I am a sinful man.*”

“*I’m not very good at this. I’m not worthy. I don’t think this is working*” are all common enough thoughts. We might even bring them to our life our faith, our relationship with God. And the one word that describes the feelings behind these sentiments in the readings today is: *futility*. There is an overwhelming sense in these texts of seriously being about to give up. Now, that feeling of futility is perhaps something we can all identify with in year three of this pandemic. And the fracture lines in our society are only becoming clearer and clearer with many people already giving up on those with whom we disagree. Giving up on the hard work of compromise and of dialogue and of seeking a common mind. We see all about us how the polarities are pushing further apart, because people sense a *futility* in engaging with each other.

Again, it’s one of the reasons we keep reading the bible and insisting on its relevance: because it speaks directly to the complexity of our human existence, including this experience of futility! But futility is a dangerous place to be in. It robs us of hope and of faith itself. But that is exactly where Peter is one morning on the Lake of Gennesaret. He and his companions have been out all night fishing and have caught nothing. They will have nothing to eat that day and nothing to sell. They also may be doubting their skills and capability as fishermen. This is where the grating voice of futility can land us. We don’t just doubt what we can do. We begin to doubt *who we are*.

The story changes for Peter - and it will change for us - when Jesus comes into the situation, when he is allowed to ‘get on board’, so to speak. Christ comes alongside and transforms a situation of failure and futility into one of abundance. Now, the gospel account, as it is told us, is far more than just a moral tale, “*If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again.*” Instead, what is particularly noteworthy are our Lord’s words, “*Put out into the deep water.*” When we are feeling swamped by futility, we need to go deeper. When we can’t figure out what to do next, go deeper. When we are mad at everybody and everyone is mad at us, go deeper! When the tasks placed before us seem insurmountable, go deeper!! When you feel like you have nothing but failure to show for your very best effort, go deeper!!! And how that confounds our instincts! So often, our instinct when things are difficult and when we are overwhelmed by our unworthiness, by a sense of futility, is to give up, to retreat!

Again, the example of her Majesty, The Queen, may be helpful. Faithfully living out a vocation for 70 years doesn't come without its fair share of tests and trials. From her own country, the Commonwealth, even her own family, there have been bumps and little eruptions and personal heartaches along the way. And one might imagine, in a lesser person, a temptation to give up. What does she, ordinary as she is, have to give? But instead, we have seen someone *remaining fast* to her solemn vows, who *has* gone out into the deep on those mysterious waters of duty and service. And surely relying on the strength of the Lord Christ himself, without whom we can do nothing.

Now, there are a couple of differences between beating our heads against a wall, doing the same thing over and over, and expecting different results, and following Jesus' command. Firstly, Jesus asks us to *return* to the ground of our futility, to return to the place of feeling stuck and stymied, and to go deeper there. We are called to fish beneath the same assumptions and habits, the same patterns that we have used before; to ask ourselves harder questions; to give ourselves (and others) more time and more commitment. Again, this confounds the trends of our contemporary context, where if something is not immediately successful it is rejected for the next shiny thing.

And secondly, to push past those dangerous thoughts of futility, *take* Jesus with you! That is what changes the disciples' action from "doing the same thing and expecting different results" into a sudden and bountiful haul. When Jesus is with us - in our minds, in our hearts, in our conversations, in our discernment, in our priorities - two things happen. First, we *are* able to go out into the deep water. We are able to take risks and stretch ourselves (and each other) toward something new. And then, we can let down our nets and actually find fish. What was once the site of futility becomes the place of abundance.

The whole point of the exercise, however, is to call Peter and his friends to become *fishers of men*. This whole account is about evangelism. Energy and enthusiasm around evangelism, sharing the good news, is *not* sparked out of being swamped by futility! Peter and his companions begin the story sad, frustrated, and hopeless. They don't believe there are any fish, and they don't believe that they have what it takes to catch them. But listening to Jesus changes everything. We may well struggle with feelings of futility. We may well feel like giving up on ourselves, on God, on each other, on our own capacities to work for God. But the road from failure to evangelist is quite short. It just requires saying yes to Jesus, and a willingness to go out to the deep. Amen.