

Homily 5th Sunday of the Year © Sunday 7th February, 2010.

Mass Readings: Isaiah 6:1-8; 1 Cor 15:1-11; Luke 5:1-11

A young man decided that he would make an attempt at climbing one of the Himalayan Mountains. Over a period of time he bought the necessary equipment, received proper advice and help, and trained for the great adventure. On the first day after arriving late in the afternoon at one of the service stations on the lower slopes of the mountain he had decided to climb, the weather started to deteriorate. Other climbers at the outpost advised him strongly to turn back.

“Look,” they said, “you have achieved a lot just by coming this far, but we strongly advise you not to go any further.”

The young man was determined. “No, I’ll be fine, I’m determined to continue.”

That night the weather got worse, but the young man’s resolve was unshaken. The other climbers were dismayed. “Look we admire your courage,” they said, “but this mountain has already claimed many lives, we strongly advise you to go back.”

But the young man was more determined than ever. “I’ll wait until the worst is over,” he said, “and then I’ll carry on.”

“But how do you ever hope to achieve getting to the summit,” the other climbers asked him.

And the young man simply replied, “My heart got there first so it won’t be too hard for the rest of me to follow.”

Producing a homily can be difficult. Sometimes I just sit in front of a blank sheet of paper for ages. I must sit and listen, with the texts beside me. Perhaps there is nothing, I can catch nothing. In the end I must begin to write. I put out into the deep waters of an empty page and, in the silence that’s there, let down the nets for a catch. I can’t wait until everything is already forged in my mind, I must begin in the hope that it will form. Despite the sense of dryness, limitation and distraction I must begin. It’s a parable of my life with Christ. I want my life to go deeper, become more integrated, meaningful, reverential, but I know the flaws. As I begin to write an idea will steal my attention, my heart, and the rest follows.

Where your heart goes, the rest of you will follow. Or we could say where your heart is taken the rest of you will follow. We hear of, may know of, people who have undertaken great challenges, feats of heroism, expeditions or journeys, especially the journey of love and marriage, because someone stole their heart. If you are married, or in love, then you know what that means. You only go with someone for life because they have stolen your heart. You may have stolen someone else’s heart and they yours, and they might complain, “Oh no, you don’t know me. I’m not the person you think I am, it won’t work because I’ll do this or that or I’m this that or the other.” And you say, “It doesn’t matter, I love you that’s all – the rest will, well, come right. It’s you I want.”

Peter is on the shore with a fishing buddy washing the nets. They are on the edge of a crowd that’s standing on the beach listening to Jesus speaking. Jesus gets into Peter’s boat and asks him to put out a little from the beach and then He carries on teaching. Then He asks Peter to put out into deeper water and let down the nets for a catch. Peter said: “Oh we were out all

night and caught nothing, there's nothing around." They wanted to call it a day, go and have some breakfast, sleep a bit. But what Peter said was: "Oh ok, if you say so." So they went out, very reluctantly I imagine, and let down the nets. They landed such a huge haul of fish that their nets began to tear, and they filled both boats to sinking point. And immediately Peter felt overwhelmed. He said to Jesus: "Leave me Lord," he said. "I'm not a good man, I'm not what you think, I'm unreliable, I'm uncommitted, and I don't have a good history." And Jesus doesn't say: "Hmm yeah, maybe I'll come back in a couple of years when you've got your life sorted." He says: "Don't be afraid: Come on, it's not a problem. Come now, as you are, from now on it's people you will catch." At that point Peter's heart was stolen. Not just by the haul of fish, not only by the teaching that had gone before, but by the hugeness of this man's vision, His depth, His acceptance. And it says, Peter and his companions left everything and followed Him. They left everything.

With regard to our relationship with Jesus, putting out into the deep for a catch, it isn't so much about taking on more things, more tasks, more responsibilities, as letting go of more things. Principally going out into deep water involves letting go of the illusion that our limitations are a problem, that our woundedness, fragility, stupidity are a liability for Christ. We have to let Him steal our heart and reveal to us how humble He is, how much He truly loves us as we are. "Leave me Lord, I'm a sinful man."

"I know, it's not a problem."

"I'll hurt and betray you, disappoint and abandon you."

"I know, it's not a problem, just come now and you will see."

Peter had to enter into the depths of such graciousness, such unconditional friendship. It happened slowly and not easily, not while Jesus was still on earth, but after the resurrection when Jesus reinstated him Peter discovered the truth that all his brokenness did nothing to weaken the fact that he was still Jesus' choice, and then he caught fish. They said of Peter, you know, this frightened, impetuous, in his own words very sinful man, that after Jesus' resurrection, after he saw the risen Jesus, whenever he, Peter, was coming to a certain place they used to lay the sick out in the streets so that even his shadow might fall on them when he passed by. What a transformation. "Don't worry Peter, from now on it's people you will catch." Was ever a promise better fulfilled?

Was Peter fantastically different? No, still flawed, still broken, but beyond the fear of his frailty. He discovered, as we all must, that our being flawed embodies our entitlement to Christ, to the One who said He didn't come for the healthy but for the sick. My frailty is the kernel, the essence, the core of my relationship with Him, and of my mission in His name. Fr. Timothy Radcliffe O.P. once writing of Fr. Gerald Vann O.P, the famous Dominican spiritual writer and retreat giver, said of him that he was one of the most important spiritual writers in post-war years. He struggled all his life with depression and alcoholism Fr. Timothy recalled, therefore he said, he had something to say. Every wound needn't be simply one more nail in the coffin. In the hands of Jesus it can become a door for the rising sun.

I can't catch a single fish unless I myself am caught, unless my heart has gone to another, to Christ. Peter had worked hard in the darkness of the night and had caught nothing until he let himself be caught in those words, "Do not be afraid." Can you hear those words – really? Can

you let those words steal your heart? They're intended to. They will take you to the deep, in yourself and in others. They will take your heart anywhere. For me to become a Catholic in mid-life was a huge decision, very scary. I was already committed to the Anglican friars, solemnly professed and ordained. But, the Catholic Church stole my heart – big journey but my heart got there first, and the rest of me followed.

We have a terrible fear of limitation in ourselves, in others, and in the world. It's not so much that we are anti-life, but anti flawed life, anti limited life, anti anything that might cost me something life. This is why people don't want those with learning difficulties to be living in their area. This is why we want assisted suicide and euthanasia. This is why we want to investigate the baby in the womb and kill him or her if advisable. The UK commits mass murder through abortion daily, hourly, and wants to do more because we are full of fear principally. Christ frees us from all fear. The message of Christ is that for His Father, for Himself, our frailty and our beauty are inseparable. For Him our limitations and our fruitfulness are inseparable. For Him our propensity to deny Him and our loveableness are inseparable. Supposing I can let down the nets in these truths about myself and about others, especially those I don't like, those whose company I avoid. Supposing I believed that in everyone their frailty, weakness, brokenness and their beauty, fruitfulness and giftedness are inseparable?

Your life and mine has something deeply important to reveal about God to others, to win their hearts. We are called and sent to catch others for Him, not because we've got things right, sometimes anywhere near right, but because we're His, always were, always are, always will be. Remember last week? "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you." So in the strength of the words of Jesus to Peter, which He repeats at this moment to you and I now: "Do not be afraid," Let us put out into the deep water of those words, of that promise, and let down our nets for a catch. I believe in those words, and into that promise I surrender my life.