

FISHERS OF MEN

Matthew 4:12-54

John the Baptist, the rugged, unique and striking preacher and fore-runner of Christ was heavily burdened on account of the prevailing wickedness and disorder of society. With righteous indignation flaming at white heat, he denounced the sins of the people. He declared the truth of God with respect to sin and its consequences. Before very long he was arrested and imprisoned by Herod the king. His crime was that he had publicly denounced Herod for seducing his brother's wife, and making her his own wife, after he had put away the wife he had.

Satan thought that if he could silence John the Baptist he would thus bring to an end the preaching of repentance and the announcement that the kingdom of heaven was at hand. Although he succeeded in getting John the Baptist imprisoned, he could not silence the message. When the voice of John the Baptist was silenced, Christ began to preach and to carry on the work. His first preaching was the continuation of the same message, "Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

Christ left Nazareth and established His residence in the town of Capernaum. There was a kind of symbolic finality in that move. Christ left His home never again to return to live in it. It was as if He shut the door that lay behind Him before He opened the door that stood in front of Him. He made a clean break between the old and the new. One chapter was ended and another had begun.

Christ went into Galilee, that area which was fifty miles from north to south, and twenty-five miles from east to west, which was densely populated. Josephus tells us that there were two hundred and four villages in it, each of which had more than fifteen thousand inhabitants. The people in Galilee were open-minded, receptive to new ideas, fond of innovations and naturally disposed to changes. Their inborn characteristics were such as to make them most fertile ground for a new gospel.

Upon His arrival in Capernaum Christ began to preach to the people. His preaching had certain characteristics which should be in all preaching. First, His voice had a note of certainty. There was no doubt about His message; He did not come with perhapses, maybes and probablys; He came with a definite message. Preaching is the proclamation of certainties, and no man can ever make others sure of that about which he himself is in doubt. Goethe said, "Tell me of your certainties: I have doubts enough of my own."

Christ had in His voice the note of authority. He did not guess because He knew. Preaching is the application of prophetic authority to the present situation. Preaching speaks from a source beyond the preacher. It is not the expression of one man's personal opinions; it is the voice of God transmitted through one man to the people. It was with the voice of God that Christ spoke to men.

The Sea of Galilee is thirteen miles long from north to south, and eight miles across from east to west. It is small and oval in shape, wider at the top than at the bottom. Due to the fact that it is small, Luke, who had seen so much of the world, never referred to it as the sea, but always the lake. In the first century there were nine populous cities on its shore, but now only Tiberias is left and it is small. In the days when our Saviour was on earth the Sea of Galilee was thick with fishing boats, but nowadays the fishermen are few and far between.

There were three methods of fishing. There was fishing by line. There was fishing with the casting net, which was a circular net, and might be as much as nine feet across. That was the kind of net that Peter and Andrew, and James and John, were using when Christ Jesus saw them. The drag net was used from a boat or better from two boats.

While walking by the Sea of Galilee Christ saw two brothers, Peter and Andrew, fishing. He called these industrious and cooperative young men to leave their secular work as fishers of fish and to follow Him as fishers of men. It was not a novel task they were invited to undertake, but a diversion of their labors to a higher service. They were called to the same kind of work, but in another sea or sphere. They were to use all the skill they had acquired in learning to fish, but in a far higher and nobler sphere. Fishermen they were, and fishers of men they were to become. However, before they could become what He wanted them to be, it was necessary for them to follow Him. Growth in ability, efficiency and effectiveness is guaranteed to all who will follow Christ.

Without hesitating or attempting to excuse themselves, those men gave up their gainful employment, severed home ties, put their trust in Him Who called them to assist Him, and went with Him, believing that He was able and willing to supply all their needs. Their fitness for discipleship was evidenced by their prompt and complete obedience to Christ's call. Because of their obedience to Him, Christ trained them, encouraged them, led them, blessed them and used them in a great way.

Christ's call to follow Him is extended to all Christians, regardless of age, race, talent, position or temperament. Linked to His call is His glorious promise: "I will make you to become fishers of men." If a believer follows Christ, he will be a fisher of men. If he is not a fisher of men, he cannot be following Christ. Here is indeed a most practical test of the character of our Christian lives.

A good fisherman possesses the very qualities which are necessary if one is to be a good fisher of men. What are they?

1. He must have patience.

He must learn to wait patiently until the fish will take the bait. If he is restless and quick to move, he will never make a good fisherman. The good fisher of men will have need of patience. We rarely see quick results in preaching or in teaching. We must learn to wait.

2. He must have perseverance.

He must learn never to be discouraged, but always try again. A good preacher or teacher will not get discouraged when nothing seems to happen. He must always be ready to try again.

3. He must have courage.

A fisherman must be ready to risk and to face the fury of the sea and of the gale. The good preacher and teacher must be well aware that there is always a danger in telling men the truth.

4. He must have an eye for the right moment.

There are times when it is hopeless to fish. He knows when to cast and when not to cast. The good preacher and teacher chooses his moment. There are times when men will welcome the truth, and times when they will resent the truth. There are times when the truth will move them, and there are times when the truth will harden them in their opposition to it. The wise preacher and teacher knows that there is a time to speak and a time to be silent.

5. He must fit the bait to the fish.
One fish will rise to one bait and another fish to another. Paul said that he became all things to all men if by any chance he might win some. The wise preacher and teacher knows that the same approach will not win all men.
6. He must keep himself out of sight.
If he obtrudes his own presence, even his own shadow, the fish will not bite. The wise preacher and teacher will always seek to present Christ and not himself. His aim is to fix the eyes of men on Christ and not on himself or on any man.

As Christ went on He saw James and John in a ship with Zebedee their father mending their nets, and He called them. Thus they were busy when they received the call that changed their lives. When Christ came to them and called them into the service of discipleship, they left their nets and followed Him.

Within Galilee Christ launched His campaign in the synagogues. The synagogue was the most important institution in the life of any Jew. Whereas, there was only one temple, and that in Jerusalem, there were many synagogues, located wherever there were colonies of Jews. The temple existed solely for the offering of sacrifice; in it there was no preaching or teaching. The synagogue was essentially a teaching institution. If any man had any religious teaching to disseminate, the synagogue was the place to start. The synagogue service consisted of prayers, readings from the law and the prophets in which the members of the congregation participated, and the address. The president of the synagogue could invite any qualified visitor to speak.

Christ came preaching the gospel. Remember that preaching is the proclamation of certainties. He came teaching in the synagogues. Preaching is the uncompromising proclamation of certainties, and teaching is the explanation of the meaning and significance of them. He came healing all those who needed it.