

THE EMMAUS SERIES

5th Sunday Year C

Isaiah 6:1-8

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

Luke 5:1-11

Put out into the deep for a catch

Scholarly analysis of today's gospel reading shows how skilfully, and prayerfully, Luke has made use of the materials available to him. Presenting elements that are used differently in other gospels, he creates a tableau rich in meaning, expressing the optimistic outlook of the Church community in which Luke has been nurtured in the faith – probably Antioch in Syria. Jesus is portrayed bringing the Good News of the 'word of God' to an eager crowd. He calls Peter and his associates to join him, becoming 'fishers of men'; and they leave everything to follow him. Luke's narrative is centred, of course, on the Lord; but the figure of Peter stands out in a remarkable way. It is Peter's boat that Jesus teaches from; Peter speaks up for the group; it is Peter who falls on his knees, overwhelmed by his sense of unworthiness. We are left in no doubt that Luke reveres Peter. His warm portrayal invites us to share his reverence for the man to whom Jesus had given a new and symbolic name. Reference to Peter's human frailty is not lacking – Luke is the only evangelist to refer to Christ's prayer for Peter: that 'his faith not fail', so that he may 'strengthen his brothers' (Lk 22:32). In the Acts of the Apostles – Luke's story of the early Church – Peter is leader and anchor-man. Luke is reflecting the importance Peter had for the first generation of Christians.

In his portrayal, Luke is anticipating the outlook of the Fathers of the early Christian centuries, who not only saw Peter as the leader and spokesman of the apostolic Church, but also saw him as giving expression to all that the Church is called to be: in his faith and his response to the call of Jesus – sharing in Jesus' way of life, given completely to the spreading of the Good News of God. There is a rich symbolism to be found in this portrayal of the origins of the Church's response to the call of the Saviour: Peter is the first person in Luke's gospel to respond to the call of Jesus (as time and again, in the Acts of the Apostles, Peter will be the first to make decisive moves in the life of the emerging Church); it is from the boat of Peter that Christ's true teaching is heard; Christ's encouraging words, 'Put out into the deep for a catch', echo down through the ages, bringing encouragement to the Church in all its difficulties and setbacks; Peter's humility in the presence of what Christ has done is an eloquent reminder to all members of the Church, great and small, that the successes of the Church – as it responds to Christ's call – are all the Lord's doing.

For all the human warmth with which it is portrayed, Peter's call is a mystery that has its origins in the eternal designs of God's love and freedom. We are reminded that we too have a place in those designs. Today's first reading – describing the awe-inspiring call of the prophet Isaiah – provides, therefore, a suitable complement to the gospel reading, inviting us to join in the response of the prophet, 'Here I am. Send me'. Paul, too, was to respond to the call to become a 'fisher of men'. In today's second reading, he assures us that the teaching through which he carries out his ministry is one with the teaching of those who first responded to Christ's call.

John Thornhill sm