

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Third Sunday after The Epiphany
January 21, 2018

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Immediately after His Baptism Jesus made the acquaintance of Peter, Andrew, James, and John. Evidently some time elapsed between the Lord's introduction to, and His calling of, the first disciples. "Leave your nets and become fishers of men." The *synoptic* gospels place the Lord's temptation in the wilderness in this interim period. We learn about that on the First Sunday of Lent.

We are left to conclude Jesus contacted these four men in Capernaum *after* having met them at least forty days earlier, in Judaea. Judaea is where John the Baptist had been preaching and baptizing. And the temptation lasted forty days. Capernaum was a center of rabbinical study and likely had a high concentration of good preachers. In the old Aramaic idiom "fishers of men" meant **preachers**. You can see the connection. Preachers believe they make converts by the persuasion of words. Fishermen gather in fish by the use of nets. The preachers themselves enjoyed the comparison, and for the most part still do. The fishermen probably shrug their shoulders and go to work!

Communicating the will of His Heavenly Father to His hearers, Jesus used common experiences and common expressions the people knew well. "Fishers of men" is one example of this and the phrase is used in today's gospel. Our Lord always gave these familiar expressions added meaning which was sometimes not immediately apparent to His listeners. That fuller meaning came to them after much thought and prayer, and often, as Scripture tells us, "after He had risen from the dead."

If "fishers of men" was a description preachers found helpful or flattering, and meant one thing to townspeople, it likely meant something else to the fishermen themselves. When the townspeople heard "fishers of men" they probably understood a man in a boat hauling in his nets bursting with fish. Think Winslow Homer in his dory at Prout's Neck, dressed in oilskins and at sunrise. But Peter, Andrew, James, and John, *were* fishermen. They never visited the MFA! They knew full well that hauling in a great catch of fish was just a small part of the story. There were early hours, *long* hours, confinement in a small workspace, waiting, and observing weather and lake conditions. There were plenty of days when hard work didn't pay off or was rewarded with broken nets and lost equipment.

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Above all, a fisherman had another quality. He knew after all the hard work and effort he could take very little credit for the size of his catch. There are forces at work beyond his control. These forces send a school of fish his way or another way. All the skill, preparations, experience, and vigilance can only put the fisherman in the best possible position to take advantage of what may or may not come his way.

If this unvarnished job description of a fisherman sounds something like being a follower of Jesus Christ, we may be on to something. Again, Our Lord always had something more in mind when He used the familiar phrase. Peter, Andrew, and the sons of Zebedee, would become preachers all right (and in the case of Peter we have evidence he was a powerful and fearless preacher.) But this would happen only after these men had turned all their inherited fishermen's qualities into a living art. In following Jesus they would first learn to be still and quiet in order to hear the voice of God in Christ. They would learn to put their skills of observation and patience to the task of seeing the current of Divine will play out in society. And with the fisherman's humility they would learn to be at the disposal of what God was revealing in His Son. They would use their skills to position themselves to make their contribution when it was required.

All of these character traits of a good fisherman would become qualities in a Christian disciple. And especially do Christians need this kind of humility to realize the disciple is never in a controlling position. Larger forces are at work in bringing souls to Christ. The individual disciple's contribution is a very small part of the encounter. But it is a necessary one. Two thousand years ago "The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us." *And it still works that way.* Jesus Himself said your witness and mine is essential. If the fisherman is ready, the good catch of fish may still not happen. But if he is not ready, *it definitely will not happen.* So too the Christian disciple hones his skills and keeps them at the ready for the Lord's use.

It is very humbling to play a small role in a very large enterprise. Many people would ask to be excused. They desire a role where they would have more say so, and get more of the credit. But those who are followers of Christ know they are not

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initiators or controllers of salvation. Our reward and our glory is in being connected to Jesus, Who chooses to make use of us as He fishes for the souls of men.