

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The 3rd Sunday after The Epiphany
January 24, 2021

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After Our Lord's Baptism He made the acquaintance of Peter, Andrew, James, and John. But some time elapsed between the introduction and the actual calling of the first disciples to leave their nets and become fishers of men. The Synoptic gospels (the first three gospels are called synoptic because they follow a common form) place the account of the Lord's temptation in the wilderness in the interim period. You hear that gospel on the 1st Sunday of Lent.

So let's do the math! Our Lord Jesus apparently contacted these four men in Capernaum after having met them at least forty days earlier, in Judaea. That is where John the Baptist had been preaching and baptizing. Capernaum was in Galilee and was a center of rabbinical study. That means Capernaum likely had a high concentration of good preachers. In the old Aramaic idiom "fishers of men" meant "preachers." The preachers themselves enjoyed the comparison, and for the most part, still do! You can see the connection: preachers gather converts by the use of words; fishermen gather fish by the use of nets.

When He was communicating to His hearers the will of Our Heavenly Father, Jesus used common experiences and idiomatic expressions people knew, and "fishers of men" is one example. Our Lord always gave these familiar expressions added meaning, which was sometimes not immediately apparent to His listeners. The fuller meaning came to them after much thought and prayer. If "fishers of men" meant one thing to townspeople, it likely meant something else to the fishermen themselves. (I wonder if men of the sea back then had an expression like "landlubbers." Nowadays sailors call motor-powered boats "stinkpots." And a naval officer assigned to a desk job ashore said he was "on the beach." And anybody not born on Cape Cod is a "wash ashore.") At any rate, when townspeople heard the term "fishers of men" they understood a man in a boat hauling in his nets bursting with fish. Think Winslow Homer: a fisherman dressed in oilskins, in a dory at sunrise! But Peter, Andrew, James, and John *were* fishermen. They knew full well hauling in a great catch was just a small part of the job description. 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 produced no catch of fish at all. Broken nets and lost

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equipment were also part of the routine fishermen knew well. Those are things you don't see portrayed in the Museum of Fine Arts!

Above all, a fisherman has to have another quality. Every good fisherman knows, after all the hard work and effort, he can take very little credit for the size of his catch. There are forces at work beyond his control: forces which will send a school of fish his way or another way. All the skill and preparations and experience and vigilance can only put the fisherman in the best position to take advantage of what may or may not come his way.

That is the unvarnished job description of a fisherman, and if it sounds something like being a disciple of Jesus Christ, we may be on the right track. Remember, Our Lord always had something more in mind when He used a 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 put their inherited fishermen's qualities at the Lord's feet. 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. With the fisherman's humility they would learn to yield to Divine forces and be at the disposal of what God was revealing in His Son, using those skills to position themselves to make their contribution if and when it was required.

All these character traits of a good fisherman would become qualities in a Christian disciple. Christians need this kind of humility, to realize the disciple is never in a controlling position, that larger forces are at work in bringing souls to Christ. If the fisherman is ready, the good catch of fish may still not happen. But if he isn't 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. The disciple's contribution is a very small part of the encounter. But it is a very necessary one which has to be made. The Lord has decreed it. "The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us." And it still works that way.

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It is very humbling to play a small role in a very large enterprise. Many people ask to be excused in order to find a role where they have more say, get more credit, and a place in the spotlight. But those who are followers of Christ know they are not the initiators or controllers of salvation. Our reward, and our glory, is in our being connected to Jesus, Who chooses to make use of us as He fishes for the souls of men.