

Who is hooked?

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 6 February 2022

A reflection by Rev Penny Jones

Epiphany 5C

Isaiah 6: 1-8; Luke 5: 1-11

The video of this worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/> The version below is not a transcript, but the script from which the reflector spoke, so there may be some changes of wording.

I thought today we might play with the ideas of hooks and fishing; of hooking and being hooked; of catching alive and who is to be caught.

Our beautiful weaving here in church today and photographed on the front of this week's worship booklet reminds us that fish and fishing are woven into the story of Jesus from the beginning. Indeed, it is believed some early Christians made eucharist with bread and fish rather than bread and wine – probably not a great choice in the Australian sun! And I hate to think what the COVID regulations would make of that idea! But there is no getting away from the fact that some of the first disciples of Jesus made a living from fishing.

Many moons ago I asked a class of year 6 children why they thought Jesus had made friends with people who fished. I had in mind certain over-sanctified qualities such as patience, perseverance, strength and even a contemplative sense of wonder born of long hours exposed to the elements and needing to pay attention to changes of wind and weather. Well forget all that! One youngster put their hand up right away and proclaimed "*so he would have something to eat of course!*"

They had a point. A point that would have been well appreciated by some of the earliest inhabitants of Sydney, the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, who lived well on the products of the sea and the shoreline. Fishing, the artefacts of fishing such as hooks and lines, and the names of different fish are among the best surviving words of their language. '*Bara*' meaning 'fish', and '*magari*' meaning 'to fish' are some of the most commonly recorded. It is also fascinating to note that in the language of the Sydney basin the word 'man' means both 'fishing person' and 'ghost', a link perhaps suggested by the ghostly figures of people fishing and cooking in their canoes by moonlight. ⁱ

The resonance with passages in the gospels where Jesus near the lake in half-light is mistaken for a 'ghost' is palpable. Both these groups of people were fed by the fish they caught. Fishing enabled them to survive despite their conquest by occupying forces, whether Roman or British. But as we know, invaders demand taxes.

Now I want you to set aside the notion, if it still lingers in your subconscious from Sunday School days, that Peter and Andrew and James and John, who with their father Zebedee ran the family fishing business, were poor and ill-educated. These folk owned two boats and had hired help at their command.

They were earning a decent living and had enough education to interact with the many other trades required to support theirs – weavers for sails, fibre makers for nets, potters for jars to store the fish and of course carpenters who would have been constantly required to help fix wooden boats damaged by fresh water. Along with tax collectors like Levi, who also knew everyone who was anyone, *'they were uniquely situated socially at the centre of complex networks ideal for the spread of new religious ideas'*.ⁱⁱ

However there is some evidence that at the time of Jesus they were feeling the pinch from increased taxation – instead of the usual 30-40% of the total catch, plus annual taxes on the number of boats owned and leasing rights for access to the water, they were facing taxes as high as 50-90%. Hence their discontent. Hence their dislike of the 'big fish' in town, who were stealing their livelihood. Hence perhaps their readiness to listen to a voice like that of Jesus – a small businessman like themselves, with big ideas about changing things.

Which brings us to perhaps the central line of our text today, Luke 5 v.10, and its key word *zogron*. It means 'to take alive'. Most likely at some point we have heard the verse translated with some variant of *'from now on you will fish for people'*. You will be doing the fishing and hooking in other words; and you will be taking your catch alive. Anyone beginning to feel a little queasy about this? I do hope so, because something very interesting is happening around this word, from a very early point in the emergence of the Christian tradition.

In the fourth century, the sometimes insultingly dubbed 'apostate' emperor Julian, who converted at the age of 20 back from Christianity to a version of Neoplatonism, becoming the last non-Christian Roman emperor, declared of this verse, *'for as the fisherman draws out the fish from waters where they were free and happy, to an element in which they cannot breathe, but must presently perish, so did these (Christians).'*" He recognised that there was a problem with this image if it was used to describe the advancement, the so-called mission of the Christian church in terms of converting others with promises of eternal life. And it was used in that way from very early days, even as it is in some churches still.

Commentators will tell you that the word *zogron* is very rare in the New Testament. By rare they mean it is to be found in just one other spot, in the second century text 2 Timothy 2:26, which reads, *'that they may escape from the snare of the devil, having been caught alive by him to do his will.'* Here it is the devil, not Christ, who is held to hook us alive; yet in the contemporaneous hymn of Clement of Alexandria, followers of Christ have become the fish, *"O fisher of mortals who are being saved, enticing pure fish for sweet life from the hostile wave."* In other words, Christ is being seen as rescuing us from this life, for an everlasting life beyond this one.

But I think Jesus was much more interested in life before death; in improving the lot of his friends around Lake Galilee. And it would be this that would get him into trouble. For even in the ancient Roman Empire, not many people were executed for feeding people, healing people, offering entertaining stories and generally being kind. So clearly the actions of Jesus of Nazareth were of a kind to incite the wrath of the governing powers.

Who was Jesus's inspiration? Not I think Socrates, who knew a thing or two about hooking others with his words. Socrates wrote, *"try to be good and to catch the good. I will help you, for I know the art of catching people"*.ⁱⁱⁱ

There have been many preachers and orators (and now of course advertisers!) who know the power of a good 'hook'. But that wasn't Jesus' concern.

Yes, people followed him, sometimes in good numbers. They liked the stories, and the healings and especially they liked the food. I'm pretty sure that Peter's mother-in-law, whom Luke recalls Jesus healing in the previous chapter, would have been very relieved by that big catch of fish – it's all very well Peter and the family getting hooked on this itinerant preacher, but where's the money for the taxes going to come from? It would have been enough to give anyone a headache!

But Jesus had bigger fish to fry.

And to understand that, we need to locate Jesus where he belongs, firmly in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets. If we want to find the clearest comparison to the sense of 'catching alive' that Jesus references, it is in Jeremiah 16:16, where the prophet is berating those who have exiled the people of Israel and polluted the land with idols. He writes:

"I am now sending for many fishermen, says the Lord, and they shall catch them alive; and afterward I will send for many hunters, and they shall hunt them from every mountain and every hill."

Or perhaps Amos 2:4, where the prophet condemns those who crush the poor, saying:

'The time is surely coming when they shall take you away with hooks, even the last of you with fishhooks.'

Jesus was not inviting us to fish in the pool of the world, and rescue from its supposedly murky waters those saved for eternal life, in the process building up the power, wealth and prestige of what would become the church.

Jesus was inviting the disciples to get in there and fish for the top end of town and bring them to justice. Jesus wanted the hides of those who were taxing his friends out of a living, and he uses his own tradition to remind them that God promises a reckoning. That's what got Jesus killed.

So, if you want to be popular, or wealthy, or safe – in this world at any rate - don't follow Jesus!

Read the small print and the rare words – our job is to '*catch them alive*', whether they're a mining magnate destroying the earth, or government imprisoning Aboriginal children in solitary confinement, or those who think sex and silence can be bought – there are hooks we can use, but it will never be easy.

But for each of us there is an invitation –

'put out into deep water and let down your nets for a catch.'

Amen.

ⁱ Noted in *The Sydney Language* by Jakelin Troy reprinted 2020 p.4

ⁱⁱ See *Jesus, Fishermen and Tax Collectors* by John S Kloppenborg 2018

ⁱⁱⁱ Socrates Xen.Mem.116