

Hymns: **51** **“Great is thy faithfulness”**
 250 **“Jesus calls us! O’er the tumult”**
 562 **“O God, what offering shall I give”**
 563 **“O Jesus, I have promised”**

Readings: **Mark 1:14-20**
 Acts 9 :1-19

“SHARING IN GOD’S MISSION”

Britain’s most popular sport is not cricket, rugby, football, motor racing or tennis but, wait for it, fishing. How standing immersed in a river for hours on end while you throw an artificial fly across its waters and pit your wits against a wily fish could command so many millions of devotees is quite beyond my understanding. But there it is fishing is number one.

The text I’ve chosen, old and familiar, relates to fishing but not fishing in the modern , sporting sense of the word. Fishing in the biblical context is not about rod and line but rather has to do with boat and net. Let’s look at it in greater detail.

1. The boat

The logo of the World Council of Churches shows a small white boat on a wide blue expanse of ocean; the Christian Church taking to the huge seas of opportunity, risk, discovery. And this word of Jesus to his very first disciples seems also to suggest he’s inviting them to come on board to join his crew. All of us who are called to follow Jesus need to understand clearly that there will be other people on board when we’ve climbed the gangplank. But note well that the Christian boat is not:

- a cruiser: posh and comfortable, a world within a world, an escape from life’s burdens, luxuries galore and flunkies on every hand. Some people like to think of the Church in that way, a nice place to be, somewhere where you can pretend that the real, nasty, world doesn’t exist.

- a rowing boat, with all its members turned the wrong way round, rowing backwards into the future. For some people that’s precisely the way they see the Church; they’d rather not know too much about where they’re going, they write off that responsibility to some guru, always a small man with a loud voice, who sits as their cox and who has the freedom to take them where he likes.

- A dingy with room only room for one. There really is no such thing as solitary Christianity. When we join the Christian boat we find ourselves on board with others, people we didn't choose and whom we don't always like very much. But there we are; and there they are, armed with the same invitation as we got.

The Christian boat is much more like a trawler. There's no room on a trawler for passengers, as I once found out when I travelled on one. Everyone has something to do and the efficient functioning of the boat depends on everyone pulling their weight.

2. The net

The principal activity of those on board the Christian boat is fishing. And this involves throwing a net out over the side of the boat to catch fish.

Now this activity doesn't just mean a crude sort of evangelising, dragging wriggling and flapping men and women unwillingly over the sides of our boat and slapping them into the hold where they linger in semi obscurity and die a long death. Fishing, in the sense I want to invoke, is a much richer concept than that.

Methodism doesn't produce much in the way of theology but one undoubted success in this field, the finest theological statement brought out in my time in the Church, was a statement called "Sharing in God's Mission". It declares "mission" to be the essential activity of the Church and defines mission as every activity which turns Christian people in love towards the wider community, all those people who live and work beyond the Church. It summed up the initiatives through which Christians reach this wider community as follows:

- social caring: every time a church opens its doors for mums and toddlers, the unemployed, the homeless, those in need of counselling; every time it holds a coffee morning for the poor people of our broken world or a bazaar to help the local hospice; every time one of you opens your home as a haven for a neighbour who's lonely or angry or sad, - *then we throw a net of love over the side of our boat and we're fishing as Jesus told us we would.*
- evangelism: whenever we present the person of Jesus and the cause he espoused to other people in the hope that they too decide to follow him; every time we name the name of Jesus and commend him to others; every time we hint at, suggest, declare, offer the good news which God has revealed in Jesus, - *then we throw a net of love over the side of our boat and we're fishing as Jesus told us we would.*
- The struggle for Justice: when Christians sign petitions, go on demonstrations, lobby parliament, write to their MP's campaign for debt relief for Third Worlds countries and for fairer conditions of trade;

whenever we try to get laws and policies made more humane and seek to change the institutions and structures which govern people so that they're warmer, more accessible, more just in the way they operate, - *then we throw a net of love over the side of our boat and we're fishing as Jesus told us we would.*

Fishing means loving. Not just loving our own, those with us in the boat. But the wider world around us where so many people are hurting. If we don't want to fish, then we may just as well shut up shop now and go home.

3. Leadership of a motley crew

It's all very well to observe that, when Jesus calls us to fish, we have to make common cause with others whom he's also called. But when we actually look at our crew mates we find that they're a very mixed bunch, often people we wouldn't normally be seen (dead) with. As I look back over my 45 years as a Methodist Minister, I shudder at the sheer diversity of types who've sat in front of me Sunday by Sunday. Just imagine: I can see now in my mind's eye'

- young and old;
- men and women;
- rich and poor;
- educated and illiterate;
- feminists and chauvinists;
- liberation theologians;
- arm-waving charismatics;
- sitting-on-hands traditionalists;
- liberals and conservatives;
- young idealists and old reactionaries;
- old idealists and young reactionaries;
- every shade of political allegiance in the spectrum from deepest red to truest blue;
- ethnic diversity on a mind-boggling scale;
- strutters and fretters.

And I ask myself: how on earth can it be possible to get that kind of a crew to pull in the same direction? And then I remember again the logo of the World Council of Churches, the boat on the big, blue sea. There was one more detail and I haven't mentioned it yet. It has a mast. And the mast is in the form of a cross. And that, of course it is, is the answer. Jesus said, "follow me and I make you fishers of men." It is Jesus alone who stands any chance of bringing order out of the chaos of our diversity, who might get such a motley crew to pull in the same direction. And that's why, wherever and whoever we are we should always check out what happens in our churches to see whether our

allegiance is fundamentally and radically to Jesus our captain or to some other aspect of theology, devotion, tradition, habit, psychological need, or whatever.

In some churches, I've detected that it's the mass in Latin or the Book of Common Prayer, or the old Hymn Book, or the pews we've always sat in, or bricks and mortar, or a charismatic style, or the previous minister, or whatever, which preoccupies us for an inordinate amount of time. Instead of those programmes which allow Jesus, that is Good News in action, to resonate through everything we do. Upon pain of falling under the next passing bus, let us never forget his capacity

- to hold the hand of lonely people;
- to bring outsiders into the circle of his love;
- to touch the untouchable;
- to reach the unreachable;
- to search for the lost and bring them home rejoicing;
- to love till it hurt;
- to take on the powers of evil armed with little other than love;
- to forgive and go on forgiving;
- to die rather than stop loving;
- to redefine the horizons of human hope;
- to show up death for what it is, the last enemy and decidedly vulnerable to the power of love.

And, when we've got the flavour of the stuff our captain is made of, to go out there and give him our unstinted obedience in working at programmes and setting examples shot through with the glorious colours of faith, hope and love.

"Follow me," said Jesus, "and I will make you fishers of men."

Is there honestly any other way worth following?

So let's do it. With conviction. Today.

God help us. Amen.