

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

12th June 2016

“The sufferings of this time are not worthy to be compared
with the glory to come.”

— Romans 8:18 (*epistle of the day*).



Even something so simple as a fishing trip, when directed by the Lord and narrated in the inspired pages of Scripture, contains deep meaning. Indeed the Gospels tell us of two miraculous catches of fish: today's Gospel, from the beginning of Our Lord's ministry, with the calling of Simon Peter, and then another Gospel read on Easter Wednesday, telling of another miraculous catch after the Lord's resurrection. If we compare these two incidents we will see that the first catch of fishes summarises the history of the Church on earth and the second catch shows the destiny of the Church in heaven.

In both miracles, the boat represents the Church. This symbolism of thinking of the Church – Church with a big “C” – as a boat is even reflected in the architecture of our physical churches. The nave, generally the largest part of the church, is reserved to the faithful, who assemble there when they participate in sacred ceremonies or come as individuals for personal prayer. Symbolically, the nave – located between the porch (the fallen world) and the sanctuary (heaven) – represents the Church on earth, the state of redeemed humanity. The word “nave” comes from the Latin *navis*, “ship.” One reason for this is visual: the nave ceiling often resembles the inside of the hull of an overturned ship! A ship represents the Church, which travels through the floodwaters of this life to the safe haven of heaven. The ancient Fathers of the Church therefore often interpreted Noah's Ark as a prefiguration of the Church. Moreover, Catholics see the Church as the “barque of Peter.” In today's Gospel Jesus Christ preached to the crowds sitting in St. Peter's fishing boat: today he continues to speak to us in the Church, the “ship” of which the pope, successor of St. Peter, is the helmsman. Taking our place in the nave of the church should remind us of our place in the universal communion to which we belong. In the rite for the ordination of a priest, the bishop addresses these words to the assembled people: “The captain of a ship as well as the passengers are in the same condition as to safety or danger. Their cause is common, therefore they ought to be of the same mind.”

The fishes caught in this miraculous draught of course represent the souls brought into the Church through the teaching of the Apostles, as the Lord himself explains: “Come ye after me, and I will make you to be fishers of men” (St. Matthew 4:19). Since ancient Christian times the fish has been a symbol of Christ since the Greek word for fish – *ichtys* – is an acronym spelling out the

first letters of the expression: “Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour.” Speaking of baptism, the early Christian writer Tertullian wrote: “we, little fishes, after the example of our Ichthys Jesus Christ, are born in water.” Saint John Chrysostom adds: “This is indeed a new manner of fishing; since those who go fishing bring fish out of the water and cause death to their catch. We, however, throw human beings into the waters [i.e., of baptism] and when they are brought out they are vivified.”

Now, for the differences between the two fishing trips. In today’s Gospel, the nets start to break. The nets, representing the preaching by which men are brought into the Church, are damaged, because during her earthly sojourn the Church is rocked by trials and her mission is threatened by heresy and schism. One important point is that the Apostles initially had an unsuccessful night of fishing; they only succeeded once Christ himself told them to go fishing. “Master, we have laboured all the night, and have taken nothing; but at thy word I will let down the net” (St. Luke 5:5). We almost get the impression that Peter is at first a bit impatient, as if to say: we fishermen of Galilee know the best time for fishing and here is a carpenter from Nazareth telling us how to do our job! But when they obey his word, they are successful. This is the basic truth of our whole spiritual life: “without me you can do nothing” (St. John 15:5). It is also the basic truth about the Church’s mission: when the fishermen trust in the Lord and present the Gospel in all its fullness, souls fill the nets; but, when the leaders of the Church trust in worldly thinking and compromise the hard truths of the Gospel, things start to flounder. “The wisdom of this world is foolishness with God” (I Corinthians 3:19). We also know that the Church on earth is made up of saints and sinners both. One of the Lord’s parables is like the complement of today’s Gospel: “The kingdom of heaven is like to a net cast into the sea, and gathering together of all kind of fishes. Which, when it was filled, they drew out, and sitting by the shore, they chose out the good into vessels, but the bad they cast forth” (St Matthew 13:47-48).

On the other hand, the miraculous catch of fish after the Resurrection illustrates not the Church militant on earth but the Church triumphant in heaven. First of all, in that second catch, the Lord is not in the boat but on the seashore. In the ancient world, the sea – with its dangerous waves and frightening inhabitants – was a symbol of the dangers of the world. The sea shore, though, is safe and stable. After his Resurrection Our Lord was no longer subject to the ups and downs of this life, but he was safely on the other side: and it is the Church’s goal to bring us too safely to this solid land of heaven. Note also that in this second catch, the Lord tells the Apostles to cast their nets only on the right side of the boat, whereas before they drop the nets wherever. Although the Church on earth contains good and bad fish, in heaven the Church is “a glorious Church, not having spot or wrinkle, or any such

thing; but ... holy, and without blemish" (Ephesians 5:26), containing only the saints. That is why this time all the fish come from the right side, as the Lord says in teaching us about the Last Judgment: "the king shall say to them that shall be on his right hand: Come, ye blessed of my Father, possess you the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (St. Matthew 25:34). This is nothing against left-handed people, of course; it is just that the right side symbolises a place of honour and the left side in the ancient world was less worthy. In fact, the Latin word for "left" even gives us our English word "sinister."

By comparison with the first catch of fishes, this other account specifically tells us, "although there were so many [fish], the net was not broken" (St. John 21:11). That is because in heaven "God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes: and death shall be no more, nor mourning, nor crying, nor sorrow shall be any more, for the former things are passed away" (Apocalypse 21:4). The trials which rock the Church in this life – persecutions from the outside, the example of bad Catholics on the inside – will one day come to an end. So in the second catch there are only good fish in the net and indeed the Gospel even tells us specifically how many there are: "Simon Peter went up, and drew the net to land, full of great fishes, one hundred and fifty-three" (St. John 21:11). There is a specific number, because in heaven there will not be a generic crowd but a very specific gathering of people: those who are called the elect – the ones, foreknown by God from all eternity, will have cooperated with God's grace and thus achieved their salvation. Bad fishes separated from the good by the sea shore, 153 giant fishes brought to the Lord: this is a sobering reminder for us that all men will not be saved and that it is up to us to decide which net we want to be in. Although, as I quoted him a minute ago, Our Lord tells us, "without me you can do nothing," the opposite is fortunately also true: "I can do all things in him who strengtheneth me" (Philippians 4:13).