

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

To Sinking Point

The call of apostles is very stark in the first Gospel; he saw Peter, he said *Follow Me*, and leaving everything Peter followed him. Luke and Matthew felt uneasy with this story, and in their different ways they modified it. Luke - our Gospel Maker this year - let Peter listen to a sermon from him in the synagogue. Peter was impressed, and invited him home for lunch. There he watched his guest heal his wife's mother of her fever. The house was besieged as the sun set (and the Sabbath ended), with people bringing the sick to be healed. Finally, Peter lets Jesus borrow his boat to be a pulpit, because a huge crowd has gathered to listen on the seashore.

Tired Fisherman

Think of Jesus sitting in the bows of the boat to teach, and Peter quietly mending the nets at the other end of the boat; they've had a night's work with no catch, and he's tired and irritable, asking himself how they're going to live with nights like this one. But with the other ear he's listening again, and what he hears is having an effect. Because when the rabbi turns on him and tells him to get the boat into deep water, instead of responding with a profanity, he agrees to do it, simply because Jesus is the sort of person he is.

Bonanza!

The result is startling. Jesus shows himself a much more impressive fisherman than Peter; and there's a more dramatic effect than that: the Gospel says *their nets began to tear...and they filled both boats to sinking point*. What it says is that Jesus has brought them to the point where the tools of their trade are about to explode with their own success. One remembers the phrases about God in the Psalms: *It is the Lord who gives wealth and poverty; he raises the lowly, sends the rich away with nothing. The Lord gives life and death, he makes riches and he makes disaster*. You can be as humanly clever as you like, and a downturn in the market or an adverse political decision can turn you into an instant bankrupt. On the other hand, the human capacity for venal crazes can make you a millionaire for no particular reason; you were in the right place at the right time. Peter is shown this in a kind and humorous way: he toiled all night and failed; Jesus tells him to try again in the light, and he succeeds gloriously; but there is the sinister motif of

the tearing nets and the sinking ship. What would Peter be worth if all his investment were taken away? Luke likes to ask this; he is the evangelist who tells the story of the man who built bigger barns to hold his bumper crops, only to learn on the night of his supreme confidence: *This very night the demand will be made for your soul; and this hoard of yours: whose will it be now?*

Follow Me

In the Gospel traditions Peter gets out of his boat three times. The first is now, when Jesus promises him, *Now it is people you will catch*. The second will be on a stormy night, when Jesus walks on the lake water, and Peter cries out *Tell me to come to you over the water!* and Jesus says *Come*. The third time will be after Easter, in John, when the Beloved Disciple says *It is the Lord*, and Peter will leap into the sea and swim for the shore. In all these places Peter is being asked to become a disciple, and he responds generously. But it isn't peaceful. His first following won't be easy, as Jesus seems to be bent on his own harm, and Peter wanted to fight for him. His second outing, walking on the water, will end in near-disaster, as Jesus has to hold him, and asks him why he has so little faith that he started to sink. The third time will be in the spring light of Easter, and here Jesus will ask him for his love three times, to undo the three denials which separated Peter from his Master on Calvary. It is wonderful that Jesus should promise him a faithful following to the death at that moment. It's here that Peter really comes to be a true disciple, and not a friend with his own agenda. That's why Jesus ends with the words the other Gospels report from the beginning of the story: *Follow Me*.

Peter

The leader of the apostles is immensely human, and we can all feel close to him. But he needed heavenly help before he could be a disciple. He tried to do it for his own fishy Galilean motives, and it wasn't enough. We too need Jesus to form our hearts, so that we can come to desire what he wants for us more than anything we have desired for ourselves. If we come to want what Jesus wants, our lives will certainly change. But they will change for a clear and loving reason which will teach us to follow the Lord. *Fr Philip*