

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

On The Waterfront

Why does this scene from the Gospel, and this Sunday, have such a specific feeling about it? It has all the breeziness of the shoreline; and perhaps a sailor would not feel as I do about it; but for me, to be on the seashore is always exciting, whatever state the water is in. I know that I'm standing on the margin between two elements, a meeting of two worlds. Whitby Harbour is a place where I go to find the sea. It's a true working seaport and fishing wharf, and the presence of seamen, and those who understand the tides and reefs, the conditions of storm, wind, and the ways of fish, the lifeboat men and longshoremen give the place a quite foreign feeling for a confirmed landlubber like me. But I love to walk out on the piers to the lighthouses and look down into the breakers, especially in a gale, with white horses smashing into the stone walls. This is the atmosphere where the familiar land meets the unpredictable sea, and it is a perfect place for *encounter*. I find it very difficult to move away.

Fishers of Men

Does Jesus arrive with a plan - does he know that he is about to do something momentous? Or is he like me - arriving on the shore, and remembering, when he arrives there, the long-forgotten power of the place? The Gospel certainly speaks as if the call of the disciples is a spur-of-the-moment thing: *as he was walking by the sea...he saw two brothers....it is almost casual*. It doesn't say *He made his way to the shore and sought out Peter*; it's the most sudden thing in the world. It's even starker in Mark's Gospel, but even so it's not explained here. Why does he approach these particular men? Even more interestingly, *why do they agree to go with him?* (answers, please, on a postcard, to the Diocesan Director of Vocations). You can see that the presence of the sea is very important to this scene; its restlessness and constant change creates a perfect *natural* backdrop to the theme of vocation, drawn here as it always has been in the Scriptures: *Leave your family, and your father's house, and come to a land which I will show you*. That was God's calling of Abraham, and Abraham put his trust in God, and that was why God found him worthy. Peter and Andrew, James and John display the same willingness to be invited away from their lives: did they actually feel that something as dramatic was happening to them, did Father Abraham furnish them with their response?

Did you get the Call?

I reckon this pattern is so central to the way of God in Scripture, that we should all try our hardest to find it in our lives. Have you had the experience of a call like that, which came to you all unexplained and unjustified, stark and simple, but with such obvious authority that you *left at once and followed*? It may have been another person who looked you squarely in the eye, and you gazed back and were clean-bowled, and "never looked back". It may have been the face, never-to-be-forgotten, of someone in need, which put your feet onto a path of service and discipline which you never ever deserted. There must be a moment, for everyone, where something came to them which sent a shiver through them, nothing based on prudence or common-sense, and not at all worked-out, or planned in advance, to which they responded with a whole heart. If you've had that experience, you know what happened to the disciples. They certainly seem to have fallen in love in a big way. The Bible excels at describing that (indeed, it isn't much interested in describing anything else).

The Seas Are On My Mind

I'd be willing to bet that fishermen like these dream about the sea. Its motion has to be as natural to them as walking on firm ground is to me. I think the Gospel has been formed, not only by many rememberings and much logical thought, but by many dreams. And the sea is always there, as the Gospel unfolds the ongoing story: stormy, as Jesus lies, "his head on the cushion in the stern, asleep": contrary, as they row against it making no headway, and he passes them effortlessly, walking across the waters, so that Peter calls out: *Tell me to come to you across the water*; placid at last, as they come in weary from a night catching nothing, and once more see a familiar form on the seashore, ready to break bread with them in the calm light of an Eastertide morning, and to promise them they would be led to him at last. All of these stories lie hidden in this first, simple-sounding "Follow Me!"
Fr Philip