

The parable of the dragnet is not one of the most popular of our Lord's stories. Perhaps this is because of Matthew's perennial urge to end in a bonfire (I can't imagine sorting fishermen bothering to set fire to *the fish that are no good*; surely the natural thing is to chuck 'em back into the sea).

But perhaps the story deserves our attention for that very reason. *The kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet cast into the sea that brings in a haul of all kinds*. The Kingdom, note: God's kingdom *brings in all kinds*. This fact alone is worth our consideration.

We constantly experience the urge to edit the Kingdom according to our own tastes and predilections. We spend ages being affronted with the different kinds who meet us in the net, and even with God, for allowing this to happen. Our small minds are full of hooks and blades, which impede and damage the work of God.

We should remind ourselves that we too are part of the catch; we too are destined for the judgment of God. It doesn't matter if we turn up looking good in our own eyes. If we haven't fulfilled what God wants of us, we have failed; and the will of God for us is hardly ever exactly what we should like for ourselves.

We can extend this thought further, and admit that we are too ready to decide that God makes mistakes with the content of our personal life. We find our harvest deficient; we decide that we have experienced what we did not want to experience, and we have not experienced what we wanted to experience, and there is no health in us.

Trusting in God doesn't just mean a vague notion that he can sort out the mess of the world. It means believing that the mess of the world – and our own little mess – is actually part of his plan. Even if a fish in a net feels he has lost his destiny as a free-living fish, it means that he has a higher purpose which has never even occurred to his fishy thought.

The distance between me and a fish looks great to me. But it's nothing compared to the distance between me and the unsearchable wisdom of God. So let us find peace in this parable: all is for a good purpose; and let us even find peace in Matthew's bonfire, which promises us that all afflictions and disorders will be eliminated at last, and God will be all in all.

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We often think we are burdened with a lot of work. But we can have little idea any longer of the huge imposition of work which burdened the pre-industrial world, before the cotton factory and the washing machine and the gas stove. Life for those who lived then was a slavery we could not contemplate; even a few hours without electricity would put all our lives in peril. They simply worked for everything every day from morning until night.

The solemn festivals of Israel interrupt the treadmill of labour. They return the children of God briefly to the blessed life Adam and Eve enjoyed in the garden, before the curse of work was pronounced on them. The feasts are there to remind us that, if disinherited, we are still members of a royal house, and not slaves.

Our Christian religion inherits exactly this same tonality. We are commanded to keep the Christian Sabbath in just the same way, and by this weekly liberation we are to declare to the world that we are not its slaves; we are to make it a day of grace and generosity, however little we may have to share. One of the most moving images we have from Judaism is the determination of Jewish mothers to spread a clean cloth, to light the Sabbath candles, and to find a glass of wine by hook or by crook to welcome the Sabbath.

Jesus calls himself in one beautiful place "the Lord of the Sabbath". His determination to allow his human life to be scented and flavoured and determined, not by the edict of the world, but by his relationship with his Father, is what we are invited to share. We may accept this in principle, and still be dominated in all things by the necessity of doing the world's will.

When Jesus proclaims the miraculous truth of his Father in Nazareth, they are charmed and impressed. Everything he says is cogent and true. But then the world they understand reclaims them: *This is the carpenter's son*. The son of the chiselling, hammering, heavy world of knots and splinters and glue; that's the truth about him; and of course it's the truth about us. So get lost, Jesus, and let us get on with the real world. We may come to Church, and say it gently, or lick over the traces, and deny all meaning except the world's meaning. But all of us share the same brand of slavery to the world, in one way or another; and he can work few miracles among us, because of our lack of faith.

Lord Jesus, let your joyous obedience infect us with its spiritual power, so that we may pass unscathed through the iron gates of our prison, and inherit the freedom and glory of the children of God.