

**Epiphany 3**  
22/1/2017

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Isaiah 9:1-4**

**Psalm 27**

**1 Corinthians 1:10-18**

**Matthew 4:12-23**

**Caught by life**

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“Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” This is the reason the disciples are called: in order to catch others.

But one of the first things you notice about fishing is that fish don't like being caught! The fish in the net – even more so the one on the line – is caught up in a life-and-death struggle.

This is often what it feels like to be evangelised – whether it's the cold call at the front door by two charming and well-dressed young Mormons or the preacher pushing a little too hard at those who've already taken the bait. We sense the threat of an end to the kind of life we think is our right.

The assumption here, of course, is that we have not already been caught by some other angler, considerably less conspicuous than the religious nutters we avoid or try not to be.

That assumption, however, is not a very safe one.

In fact, we are all fish in a broad ocean and on the shores there stand myriads of people, institutions and forces casting lines to hook us in. The political upheavals of last year were precisely processes of “fishing for people”, as is every more or less democratic process. Democracy is not a matter of freely thinking people thinking freely about who they want to vote for; it is a matter of casting bait in the form of visions and promises which flash in the water to catch our eye, to land us in this basket and not that one.

In the same way, the engine of our consumer society is advertising with the goal of creating further consumption. This is, again, precisely a “fishing” expedition, whether takes the form of sale leaflets in the letter box, cold calls on the telephone or billboards on the highway featuring pretty young things who seem to need to wear fewer clothes when drinking a particular drink, driving a particular car or holding a particular phone: “bait”

Sometimes we recognise the lures, and swim around them, but the truth is that we are all *already* caught, each one of us, in things which enslave us, not least the delusion that we are free and that it is our right to be free in this particular way.

Our existence, then, is not threatened by the fact that someone might be fishing for us with the hook of some purportedly good news; to have hooks in front of our noses is simply part of what it means to exist. The question which matters is, *Who* or *what* is fishing for us, and is it for our own good?

Evangelism *is* a struggle of life and death. But if indeed it is “*evangelism*” – literally the bringing of *good* news – then the life-and-death struggle is not that of a fish which is being dragged *from* life to death. Rather, if the gospel is *good* news, the evangelist drags her catch from *death into life*. It is against *life* that we struggle.

What, then, is this life?

It is what we see in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, who also wanders the shores of our lives and calls us also to follow, and to fish.

In Jesus we see a person whose life is contained not in the net in which some passing power has caught him, but in the God who sent him, calls him and justifies him. He lives precisely in the midst of us, and wholly *for – unto – us*, but without the entanglement of the things which have caught us – those things over which he constantly clashed with the religious authorities. Jesus lived freedom for others, a God-mediated life.

But a life lived like that is more than the world can bear, which is precisely why he did clash with the powers. And so, in the end, Jesus is himself hooked: hooked on a cross cast into the river of the water of life, wrenched out of the life of God's kingdom into the death which comes with every other dominion, and left to end his story gasping on the shore.

And that would be the end of the story but for the power of God which takes the weakness of Jesus' humility and the foolishness of his trust of God and reasserts him in the resurrection: this *is* how we are to live before God and before each other.

It is only resurrection – the power of God – which can haul us back into life, for the dead can't even bite down on a hook which will lift them up. Salvation can be had only through *gift* – the giving of something which we could not make or earn or buy for ourselves. Perhaps evangelism, then, is more a matter of nets than of hooks.

But however we model it, it becomes imperative that we hear the good news, and speak it.

St Paul asks,

*...how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"* (Romans 10)

Our message is one which looks weak and sounds foolish – that God's claim on us is a gift of life. We really only half-believe it within the churches, if even that. How could be that, for all of our other wisdom and power, for all of our planning and budgeting and strategising, the humility of Jesus and the power of God are the things we need most? This is the question the gospel poses.

"Follow me", Jesus said, "and I will make you fish for people".  
"And immediately they left their nets and followed him."

Here we find our light and our salvation (Psalm 27.1).

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