

The message of all the people in our scriptures today is: “I’m not very good at this. I don’t think this is working.” “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!” Isaiah says. “I am the least of the apostles,” Paul says, “Unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.” “Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing,” Peter says. “I’m not very good at this. I don’t think this is working,” our scriptures say. Have you ever felt like that in life? In ministry? Over the last forty years I have seen many situations in the life of the Church just like that.

There is one word that describes the feelings of all of our scripture writers this morning: futility. There is an overwhelming sense in these scriptures of seriously being about to give up. Its very easy to believe our efforts have been futile. To give up on our tradition, to water down our faith to be more attractive somehow, to dumb down our liturgy and music to be more ‘inclusive’ to look for quick fixes, to dwell in the safe shallows of human problem solving.

This is the situation in our scriptures, and this is all too often the situation in our lives. Futility is a dangerous state. It robs us of hope, of possibility, of faith itself. This is where Peter is one early morning on the Lake of Gennesaret. He and his companions have been out all night fishing and have caught nothing. They will have nothing to eat that day and nothing to sell that day. They also would be doubting their skills and capability as fishermen.

This is where the slow-rising tide of futility can land us. We don’t just begin to doubt what we can do. We begin to doubt who we are and why we do what we do. To man the life boats, to fight amongst ourselves, to try and do human problem solving.

Then Jesus comes into the situation, and if we allow him, everything changes.

“When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, ‘Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.’ Simon answered, ‘Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.’ When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So they signalled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink.”

This story is about far more than just, “If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again.” Or “if at first you do not succeed use a bigger hammer”. One thing Jesus says here jumps off the page: “Put out into the deep water.” Let that phrase pierce your heart. “Put out into the deep water.” When we are feeling swamped by futility, we need to go deeper not shallower. When you can’t work out what to do next, go deeper.

When you are irritated at everybody and everyone is irritated at you, go deeper. When the tasks placed before you seem insurmountable, go deeper. When you feel like you have nothing but failure to show for your very best effort, go deeper. “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets.”

What is the difference between beating our heads against a wall, i.e. doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results, and following Jesus’ advice?

Two things. Jesus asks us to return to the ground of our futility, the place of feeling stuck and stymied and sad, and go deeper there. Fish deeper beneath the same traditions and habits and patterns that we have used before so successfully and for good reasons in our world wide church for millennia and re-discover, renew. Give ourselves and others more time and more commitment.

And then do something radically different in our modern world, but radically the same since the time of the Apostles: Take Jesus with us. That is what changes the disciples' action from "doing the same thing and expecting different results" into a sudden and bountiful harvest. That's what will change our actions from "doing the same thing and expecting different results" into a sudden and bountiful harvest.

When Jesus is with us—in our minds, in our hearts, in our conversations, in our discernment, in our priorities, two things happen. First, we are empowered to go out into the deep water. We are able to take risks and stretch ourselves and each other towards renewal. And then, we can let down our nets and actually find fish. What was once the site of futility, the very same site becomes the site of abundance, discovery, and sustenance.

Notice one more interesting detail in this gospel. At the end of the fishing part of the story, we read this sentence: "And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink." They began to sink? That sounds pretty problematic. Like, actually took on water and started to get alarmingly low in the frighteningly deep water? If they go down in the deep water, they're in trouble. They're a pretty good ways offshore. It might be hard if not impossible to swim back, and the disciples may not have the "walking on water" skills that Jesus has.

We don't actually know how they dealt with it. Luke doesn't tell us that they started rowing hell for leather for the shore, or had to chuck some of the fish out of the boat, or who knows what. Peter, in fact, is so overcome by the miracle that he either doesn't notice or doesn't care that the boat is about to sink. He falls to his knees before Jesus and says, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!"

We do find out by the end of the story that they make it back to shore, but that detail that Luke includes is important. The boat begins to sink. Notice the significance of that in the context of the end of this story. This is Peter, James, and John's call to ministry. Jesus says, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people," and "When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him."

The boat begins to sink. This is a symbol of having to leave your old human problem solving mentality life behind. The boat was the fishermen's primary tool of the trade, the economic engine of their lives. They needed that boat, and they needed it to stay afloat, so they and their families could stay afloat. It's a mistake many churches and parish councils make- they think that through their own power they can keep the boat afloat, they can solve the problems.

But when Jesus turns up and is listened to, the bounty and abundance his presence brought into their lives completely overwhelmed their old worldview, their old tools, their old ways of problem solving and of living their lives. "Business as usual" just couldn't stand up to following the call of Jesus. Saying yes to Jesus means we have to give up all our most cherished sources and notions of security, to find true security and freedom in him.

And remember what the call is to Peter and his friends: to become fishers of people. This is about mission, its deep, not shallow- really deep and real mission.

And that is surprising. We don't expect energy and vocation around mission to be sparked out of being swamped by futility. Peter and his companions begin this story sad, frustrated, afraid, and almost hopeless. They don't believe there are any fish, and they don't believe that they have what it takes to catch them.

But Jesus says, "Put out into the deep water, and let down your nets for a catch," and everything changes. The shamefaced group of failed fishermen are courageous renewed followers of Jesus by the end of the story.

So ask yourself: where do I find futility in my life? Where do I feel like a failure? Where am I ready to give up? Where have I lost hope?

And then listen to the call of Jesus: "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch... Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people."

The road from failure to real growth is quite short—it just requires saying yes to Jesus and saying yes to depth. What will you do? What will we do?

Fr Robert Newton