

Sunday 3 September 2006 6.30pm: Evening service -World of Work

Put out into deep waters

Readings: Luke 5:1-11

'Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch'

My main experience of fishing is aged 14, watching my younger brother excitedly catch fish far too small to keep from off Swanage pier, while I sat reading in the sun. However, I'm sure we can all to some extent imagine how Simon felt as he sat cleaning his nets that morning. The exhaustion of a long night of physical labour accompanied by the anxiety and frustration of having nothing to show for it. I'm sure we've all experienced days that leave us drained, frustrated, unsatisfied and with a feeling of failure and possibly fear. They could be the result of a busy but unsuccessful day at work, constant interruptions and demands distracting us from our main goal. Or you may know the fear of unemployment or under-employment and the exhaustion, the feelings of under-achievement and shame which can accompany it. For Simon, lack of fish would also have been a threat to his livelihood.

For me, having worked as a GP in South London for the last 3 years, my main source of frustration and lack of success comes from certain patients. One very descriptive but rather unkind term for these patients is 'heartsinks'. The sort of people, who when I see their name on my appointment list I can feel myself physically reacting, closing in and often hoping they won't turn up. My heart sinks. I'm sure most of you could identify people you know, who you work with or work for who create the same sort of reaction. People who leave you angry or upset, who drain you of life.

The patients who most often create this reaction in me are the ones who leave me feeling helpless and at times hopeless. I know this is related to their own sense of helplessness, but that doesn't make me feel any better. For various reasons I can't find a way to help them. Sometimes there are practical social issues that I have no power over. Often there are emotional problems that I don't think western medicine or even western psychology can really help. They often don't accept the help we do offer and yet they come back again and again asking for help.

'Put out into the deep water' says Jesus. After a night of failure, go back and go deeper.

I love this story in Luke's Gospel. It is worth remembering this is not the first time Jesus and Simon (later to become Peter) have met. In the previous chapter Luke tells of Jesus' visit to Capernaum. I assume Simon was listening to him speak at the Synagogue. Certainly Jesus went straight to his house afterwards where he healed his mother and then all the sick and possessed in the town. I reckon Simon had witnessed his fair share of miracles. But we aren't told of him reacting to any of these events. Instead it takes a boat full of fish to bring him to his knees.

Fish – something so familiar to him. Caught with his own nets in a lake he fished every night, yet enough to almost sink his boat. There, in the well-known, routine, sometimes unsuccessful and frustrating reality of daily life and daily work he finally recognises and with his whole being responds to this man, Jesus.

‘Put out into the deep water’. What might that mean for us?

Over the last few years it has meant many things – although I think in most cases I’m still paddling in the shallows. It has included continuing to study medicine even when it felt more like 5 years of having my confidence knocked; through the great medical myth that one learns by humiliation and through a sense of being unnecessary and in the way. It has meant taking the extra time as a junior doctor in hospital to listen to angry relatives, explain unwanted diagnoses, to support a depressed colleague. In general practice it has meant being actively involved in the tick-box approach to patient care of the new GP contract (because it can improve care) while refusing to let the pressure it produces turn patients into mere points. And with those heartsink patients? Well, I certainly don’t have all the answers. Sometimes it’s meant risking the unpopularity of challenging them. Sometimes asking the more in-depth questions that could lead to overwhelming answers. And often it’s just continuing to listen and to accept my own helplessness and vulnerability. For it is these situations, with all their potential to drain life from me, that also bring me to my knees before God, aware of my own failings and inadequacy and my enormous need for him.

And now, I believe that this deep water includes Malawi.

In 2 ½ weeks I leave here to spend 3 years working at St Luke’s Hospital, a rural Anglican hospital in Southern Malawi. Malawi is a country the size of England and Wales – quite insignificant by African standards. It lies in the rift valley and so contains the incredibly varied beauty of a spectacular lake, high mountains and of course amazing wildlife. One of the densest populations of leopards and more species of bird than the whole of Europe. The country doesn’t benefit from the rich mineral resources of many of its neighbours and 90% of its 12 ½ million people are subsistence farmers. Within its own borders there has been longstanding peace but it has had to accommodate millions of refugees from neighbouring Mozambique. There is now a relatively stable government but the name Hastings Banda, Malawi’s former dictator, will be known to many of you. These and many other factors contribute to the extreme poverty of the population. An article in yesterday’s Guardian placed it as the 4th poorest country in the world.

So, working there I think my empty nets will arise from the 1 in 7 children who die before their 5th birthday. The almost 2 women per 1000 who die in childbirth – the 3rd worst maternal mortality rate in the world after Afghanistan and Sierra Leone. 70% of hospital patients suffer from HIV and although drug treatment is increasingly available people can’t always afford the food they need to take with the drugs or the transport to hospital appointments. Also, there is still the enormous stigma and fear attached to the disease that prevents people from coming for testing. The country has a terrible shortage of nurses and I’ve heard there are more Malawian doctors in Manchester than Malawi. At St Luke’s I will initially be one of 3 and later 2 doctors covering a region with a population of 89,000. In the general practice I have left I was one of 3 doctors for 5,500 patients.

A small amount of medical knowledge can do little to change any of this so there will certainly be times of helplessness and failure.

So why go?

Well, I guess because I believe there will be fish. I believe there will be moments when the ordinary routine and the times of pressure and helplessness are transformed. Moments when I become more aware, more responsive and more alive. Not because of who I am or what I can do but because of who Christ is, because of his total aliveness and the enormous love he has for me, for all of us, and for the people there.

It is in John's gospel that the re-named Peter declares 'Lord to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life'. It feels almost like a re-affirmation of this initial decision to leave everything and follow Jesus.

I certainly can't claim to be leaving everything. But I go, trusting that in a small way I am also following.

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