



The Church of England
in Essex and East London
Diocese of Chelmsford

Fishy business

25 January 2026 – Epiphany 3

Matthew 4:12-23

Adam, Bishop of Bradwell

12 Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. 13 He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the lake, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, 14 so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

15 'Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,
on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles-

16 the people who sat in darkness
have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death
light has dawned.'

17 From that time Jesus began to proclaim, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'

18 As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the lake-for they were fishermen 19 And he said to them, 'Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.' 20 Immediately they left their nets and followed him.

21 As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. 22 Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

23 Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

[Matthew 4.12-23]

The south coast of Sicily. Hillsides covered with olive trees. Lower down there are vines and lime orchards. Limestone rocks that appear between the fertile soil are bleached.

Siracusa, the coastal city where St Paul landed briefly. Some incredible history. The architecture. The climate, an almost-African sun which sets within an hour of 6pm. Grab a drink. It's cold in the fridge. Sundowners.

On the table is today's focaccia, olive oil from the neighbouring farm, fresh anchovies, local cheese, tomatoes, garlic, pasta and washed down with, well, some water?

We had not gone to Sicily for their white or red wine. But with my family we were making a sort of pilgrimage. A programme called 'Chef's Table' looks behind the scenes at some of the world's top restaurants, following the stories of the inspirational characters behind them.

Cameras, zooming in on the food, make it look outrageously beautiful. One of them featured Café Sicilia and the man behind it, who makes what the programme called "some of the world's best gelato".

Our 'sort-of pilgrimage' took us to the centre of the town of Notto. We parked up and made a beeline for Cafe Sicilia.

It was just as good as the programme made it out to be. That gelato is just what you need at about 11 in the morning. And, for that matter at almost any point in the day!

For a real pilgrimage – much closer to home – book 4th July in your diary for this year's Bradwell Pilgrimage. There will be ice cream there as well!

But back in Essex and East London in January we are trying to forget about food. Thanks Bishop Adam! All that Christmas excess needs to be in the past.

So maybe it's OK to talk about... fish. Because as we dive into the familiar world of the gospels there's a lot of it. Fish and fishing and we wonder about their technique:

'He saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the lake-for they were fishermen.'

[Matthew 4:18]

Today we have fish and the sea and the tools of their trade - what? A net. The net thrown out across the water which drops down and gathers up everything, not only the best fish but the worst as well.

'And he said to them, 'Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.' Immediately they left their nets and followed him.

[Matthew 4:19, 20]

And we have and a command: to follow and to fish. So, too, those commissioned to fish for people will, like the nets cast into the lake, gather up everything.

Something called dualism is a persistent temptation with a category called 'sacred' separated from something known as 'secular'. This has the effect of creating a hierarchy of things that are of importance to God in the world.

We can find ourselves thinking that things done wearing a dog collar or with a Church badge, are inherently more valuable than those which are not. The reverse holds, I suppose, that there seem to be things which are of less interest to God or that He doesn't give much of a snuff about.

But, the truth of it is that nothing is 'secular', in this way, except sin. As the Psalmist puts it, referring to the way God has ordered the world:

'You have put everything under their feet, all flocks and herds and beasts of the field, the birds of the air, the fish in the sea, and all that swim in the path of the seas.'

[Psalm 8:6b-8]

What the Psalmist is doing with a sweep of her hand is to indicate that everything is under God, the economic order – it being an agrarian society, that's the flocks and herds – as well as the created order - the wild stuff, the birds and fish – all the fish.

The Dutch pastor and politician Abraham Kuyper said: "There is no part in all creation of which God, who alone is sovereign, does not proudly declare "this is mine!""

I expect you have tripped over this challenge, one way, or another. The overseas missionaries get a piece of red wool, attaching them on the map at the back of church to the country they're working in. And that is really good and we should certainly pray for and support them.

But what about the pieces of wool on a map to the workplaces, the homes, the schools? What about your volunteering which you so generously give, and which, as I've heard from some of you, you could do with being more thanked, or better used.

So if the Kingdom fisherman gathers every kind in the sea then we, the Church, should not get into the habit of rejecting as junk the flotsam and jetsam of the world – the human counterparts of the fish with no price at the market.

Did you get out of church buildings at Christmas? So many churches had a good time this year with carols at the pub or on the green.

One parish church where my wife is the vicar has got trouble with the building so their carol service was in the barn of the local pub. Not quite a stable but it felt immersive. All sorts of fish turned up. It's dark, a drink in hand, a carol sheet and a piano.

And if it's worship and in the parish you don't need a public entertainment licence, so: "Come, all Ye Faithful", cranking out a few well-known carols.

A couple of years ago I was doing that and two blokes who had clearly been enjoying some mulled wine along with the carols came up close in to my personal space and said "we thought last year was brilliant, but this year was even better!"

"Well," I said "that's great to hear. What about next year?" They looked at one another, and, with one voice said "Glastonbury!!"

Cast the net and enjoy! For the fish of all types caught up in it there is only one qualification of judgement, namely that we believe.

The Cross and resurrection sets all my effort to one side. It assumes a holiness to God, so that sin has to be paid for. Something liberal cultures can't handle.

And the Cross assumes an openness, almost a promiscuity to the grace of God, that no matter how you have lived, no matter what you have done, you can still receive forgiveness and new life. Something traditional societies can't handle.

We rely on Him to take us across the threshold of eternity, rather than relying on ourselves - as if our own merits would ever get us so much as 2 foot off the ground.

There's so much freedom on offer. One of these is that if you receive what Jesus has done by His death and resurrection is you don't need to be afraid of death any more.

But don't wait until then to find out. As St Matthew writes so strikingly, the call is to respond '*immediately*' to Jesus' declaration of the gospel:

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'

[Matthew 4:17]

Go fishing, not with advice on how to tickle a particular type of trout. Go fishing for fun! Because of good news.

Don't wait for the year to unfold, repent and believe - now.

I do have a high view of ice cream, good gelato and, indeed fish. But next time you eat some remember it's not just a spiritual thing. The resurrection is physical, you could even say, secular.

Follow me, says Jesus. '*I'll make you fish for – all sorts of – people.'*

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