

Going fishing

Do you know that the most popular sport in Australia is? As organised team sports go, apparently football/soccer edges out netball these days, but there's lots of individual sports that can make a reasonable claim, too. Golf. Cycling. Jogging. Walking. And one which lobby groups have claimed many times is the most popular participation sport in Australia.

Fishing.

The claim goes something like: "Well, most Australians have, at some time in their lives, gone fishing". That's probably true, but I suspect that most Australians have also, at some point in their lives ridden a bicycle, swum, kicked some sort of football and played backyard cricket, too.

So, perhaps the claim that fishing is the most popular participant sport is not quite right, but it does show that most Australians know a bit about fishing, right?

I remember going fishing on a school excursion when I was in year one at school: We'd done a unit of work on the topic 'under the sea', so we went on a bus to the Sydney Fishmarkets – the old Sydney fishmarkets, where you could meet real fishermen. I remember it was quite interesting, and we even got to taste some Balmain bugs with cocktail sauce – it's hard to appreciate how exotic such a thing was in 1974, and most of the class didn't dare taste the little cubes of white flesh that we were offered.

After the visit to the markets, we had a picnic lunch in a harbourside park, and then we all went fishing. Everyone had to bring a fishing reel, and the teacher supplied the bait – two packets of blood worms. It probably seemed like a great activity when it was being planned, but in practice, 30 six year olds fumbling with sharp hooks, was not a good idea. Even today, I feel sorry for the teacher and the two mothers who'd come along to help, who ended up having to apply Band-Aids to stabbed fingers, remove hooks lodged in school uniforms, and slide worms onto almost all the hooks.

In the unofficial competition amongst the children, a boy named Ashley came first – he caught a leatherjacket which was just big enough not to have to throw back. I was the only other one to have caught something that day. And I caught a coat hanger.

Ashley got to take his leatherjacket home, but sadly, I had to leave my coat hanger in a bin.

I share this story, not just because it's my greatest sporting achievement, but as a reminder that we all know what fishing's like. We know about rods and reels, and hooks and sinkers. And bait. The long wait. Moments of excitement, if we're lucky. The boredom. The disappointment.

So when we read in Matthew's gospel a story about some people who were fishermen, and who Jesus told he would make them fishers of men, we can sort of relate to it, can't we?

I think we can run into a problem when we look at today's gospel reading, because we all know about "fishing", we all know what Jesus was talking about to the disciples he was

calling, right? But I think we have a modern, recreational experience of fishing which is quite different from the experience of Simon and Andrew.

I don't think the fishing that most of us know, is the fishing that the fishermen of Jesus' time knew.

So, what was the experience of Simon and Andrew – those to whom Jesus said ““Come, follow me...and I will send you out to fish for people.” (or, in the traditional translations, those he would make “fishers of men”)?

To put it in context, this is the very beginning of Jesus ministry, verse 17 tells us “From that time on Jesus began to preach, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.””

The kingdom of heaven is near! Good news!

And remarkably, the proclamation of the good news, wasn't to be done by Jesus alone.

We read in verse 18, that as Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen.

They were fishermen. They weren't people who went fishing when they were on holiday or on weekends. Fishing was their job. They didn't bait hooks or dangle lures or cast flies in the hope of tricking fish into biting their hook, but rather, they methodically harvested their catch from Lake Galilee.

They would cast out a net, in a place where their experience and observation would indicate to them there were fish, then they would haul the net in, and harvest their catch.

And Jesus said to them, “Come, follow me... and I will send you out to fish for people.” (4:19). We need to remember when Jesus talks about teaching them to catch people, or fish for people, he's talking about fishing in the way that Simon and Andrew were familiar with, not the way most of us know it today. It's not recreational. It's not done simply 'for fun'. But it's a job, and it's a serious thing. And that's not to say it wouldn't be a rewarding job or even an enjoyable job - at least sometimes - but also it would be, at least sometimes, hard work, unpleasant work and even disappointing work.

[But] At once they left their nets and followed him. (4:20). They dropped what they were doing and followed Jesus. We don't know why exactly, we don't have an account of a convincing argument or a compelling miracle, but we know they did. Effectively, they gave up their way of life to follow Jesus.

And, in a way, they gave up 'who they were'. Even today, we so often define people by what they do. But Simon and Andrew gave up being fishermen to become fishers of men.

Then we read that Jesus “Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets...” (4:21). The work of the fishermen was not just casting nets and hauling in catches, but it was also preparing and repairing the nets, and would have also involved maintaining and repairing the boats, transporting the catch to the market, and selling the

catch to achieve the highest possible price. The stuff of being a fisherman is not just pulling fish out of the sea.

And once again, Jesus called these brothers.

and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him. (4:22)

And once again, the brothers dropped what they were doing, this time leaving their father behind, and went and followed Jesus.

In the case of Simon and Andrew, and then in the case of James and John, they stopped what they were doing and started to follow Jesus. They stopped being fishermen, and followed Jesus to become fishers of men.

They went to join Jesus in his mission.

In the gospel accounts, we don't learn that there was anything special about them, they weren't as far as we know great speakers or philosophic thinkers or even particularly devout. They weren't rabbis or scribes or teachers of the law – they were fishermen. Average people.

Just as it is with us. We're not called to be followers of Christ because of what we can do. We're not called because we have particular skills to use to build up the church or spread the gospel. It is, of course our privilege and even our responsibility to use what gifts we have for the mission of the church, but we're not called because of those gifts.

So, Jesus says to those fishermen, "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people."

And here's where our modern understanding of fishing can easily become an issue. I think sometimes we modern Christians can take a 'recreational fishing' approach to the mission of our church. I commented earlier that we all know what fishing's like. We know about rods and reels, and hooks and sinkers. And bait. The long wait. Moments of excitement, if we're lucky. The boredom. The disappointment.

And the mission of our church can be like that, in practice. The rods and reels are the paraphernalia of mission – the videos, the audio-visual systems, the pamphlets and so on. We like to have a lot of those on hand. As many fisherman will tell you, if a fishing rod's good – then two is better, and three or four better still.

And our hooks and our bait? Church signs and websites are the obvious ones.

And there's our various outreach events, which sometimes can just end up being an 'event' – where success ends up being the headcount, rather than outreach as such. We hope that they work, we really do. Just like we hope the signs really do work.

And sometimes they do work. But just like with the fishing we know, there's long waits for even a nibble. There's very few who make it as far as the side of the boat – to the church. And even fewer are brought on board – to come to know Jesus.

Mostly, just like with most of experience with fishing, it's disappointing.

But that's not the experience that Simon, Andrew, James and John had of fishing nor the experience they had of following Jesus.

Their experience of fishing wasn't sitting around in boat, tossing a line out and hoping for the best. They weren't recreational fishers, it was their job - they fished for a living. It may have been enjoyable and fulfilling, but it wasn't something they just did occasionally, when they had some free time. It was something they were committed to.

They prepared and maintained their nets, travelled to where the fish were, cast their nets and hauled them in. And it was all important. They could have had the best nets in the world, but caught nothing if they didn't go to where the fish were. They wouldn't have ended up with any fish if they hadn't hauled the nets in. And even the best fishing techniques would be useless if the nets themselves weren't up to the job of holding the fish.

And I think that's how we need to be when we're thinking about being fishing for people in the 21st century.

And rather than sitting in our church buildings waiting a bite on a line – for a person to wander in the front door, we need to go to where the people are. And that doesn't mean going to New Guinea or Africa as missionaries for most of us. It is a sad fact that most people around us don't know God. Maybe they haven't heard the gospel, or maybe they've rejected it in the past, or maybe they've drifted away. But really for us to go where the people are simply involves us not retreating into our churches – but to be out there, meeting people, talking to people. Our neighbours, our classmates, our colleagues and co-workers, maybe even the people at the shops.

It's bit scary to do that. But the good news of Jesus is the best news that we've received. And we know that when we have good news in the rest of our lives we typically want to share it ("The operation was a success!", "I'm going on a great holiday", "My granddaughter did well at school!"). So really, we should share the good news of Jesus – not because we have to, but because we want to.

Is a message that the whole world needs to hear. The good news of God: In Jesus, the time has come, and the kingdom of God is near. In Jesus' death and resurrection all that is needed has been done.

And all the world needs to do in response to that good news is repent – stop doing the bad things – and believe in the good news. Put their trust and hope and faith in Jesus.

And we, as his followers, get to share that good news, to be part of that mission.

We need to be fishers of people – but not in terms of metaphorically baiting a hook, and casting it out into the water, and then waiting, patiently for a nibble.

That's not the sort of fishing that Simon, Andrew, James and John carried out in Lake Galilee. We need to do our fishing for people seriously. We need to do it confidently. And we need to do it faithfully. And we need to trust in Jesus to empower and equip us for that mission, because Jesus says to each one of us: "Come, follow me... and I will send you out to fish for people."

Amen.