

Synod Sermon 5.8.24
St Mary's at HTC
Luke 5:1-11

It was a brisk, but sunny day, and I was on a boat with dear friends from school days. Pete, whose permission I have to share this story, took us out fishing. We went to a very particular spot at the harbour mouth. It's their secret spot he said – and with the conspiratorial grin, told us how people motor on by, not realising what they're missing out on!

It was the first time I'd been fishing for *years*. Pete, "just-call-me-bait boy" baited the hooks. I know, but it's a step too far for me. As I wondered if I still knew how to fish, the muscle memory kicked in and I discovered that I could still cast a line. So, I did and then settled in, preparing to wait.

Within a few minutes the first snapper came in. Then another, then another. There was much laughter and a bit of shrieking (that may have been me) as we kept Pete – "just call me bait boy" – busy attending to the messy bits. Then, as a boat approached, he ceased all activity, and assuming a casual pose, said, "heads down – *nothing to see here folks.*" That

was our cue: look natural, and don't attract attention to the best kept secret in the Whangarei harbour. That's the competitive nature of recreational fishing, I suppose. It's not that anyone really believes that there's not enough fish for everyone, it's just the sense that this is our spot, and if you fish here, we might miss out somehow.

At some point we decided we had caught enough. More than was necessary had been returned to the sea to live another day, and we still had an ample catch: some for our dinner, some for the friendly neighbours, and some to take home the next day. Pete generously even packaged some up to give to my parents, who I was going to visit on the way home.

As we sat at dinner that night we revelled in the events of the day, the abundance of our catch matched by the abundance of laughter, love and care, of people who know each other well, have history with each other, and have been through the thick and thin together.

It was this day that came to mind as I reflected on tonight's gospel reading and the story of a massive catch of fish.

There was no hilarity and jubilation about this fishing trip, however. Simon Peter, James and John have been out all night and caught nothing. Exhausted and discouraged, all that remains to be done is wash the nets and go home, sleep, and hope that tomorrow will be better.

And then Jesus says, “put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch”. We can imagine the exasperation in Simon’s voice, “Are you serious? After the night we’ve had?” His reply is one of someone who is at their limits and has accepted the scarcity of the results of their efforts.¹

Yet he is willing to try again. The deep water, which speaks of a realm beyond his perceived limits of knowledge – and energy, beckons. So, he obeys - hauling a catch so large that it goes beyond any immediate need or provision.

A catch like this represents stability and security. Yet, Jesus

calls him and his friends *away* from it: to follow him and become fishers of people.

As one commentator observes, “Their call did not come while they were quietly listening for it but, rather at the end of a long, sweaty work session where they were discouraged and ready to pack it in for the day... It was amidst this weariness and pessimism that Jesus shows them something amazing and new – abundance and surplus in the seemingly barren waters.”²

As disciples of Christ, called to mission, it can feel that we are in barren waters. Our deep waters may be the places that go beyond our resources, our knowledge our energy. As the *church*, this can lead us into a mindset of scarcity where we mourn our decline and our marginalisation in society. It is in this place of dislocation, and in our need for stability, says Martyn Percy that “our church is self-absorbed with its self-preservation.”³

¹ Kendra A Mohn Working Preacher, Commentary on Luke 5:1-11

² Pamela Cooper-White. Feasting on the Gospels pg 124

³ Marin Percy, The Humble Church pg 22

This is not to say that the scarcity is not real. In our local communities, in our communities of faith, it is a struggle to pay the bills. It can be a struggle to maintain or even attain the critical mass of people needed to do the things that maintain our worshiping life together, let alone reach out beyond ourselves in relevant and meaningful ways.

In his book, *Scarcity: Why Having Too Little Means So Much*, economist Sendhil Mullainathan explains that when a group's focus is directed towards that which is lacking, the likely outcome is tunnel vision. This fixation makes it difficult to concentrate on anything else, diminishing the ability to think creatively and problem solve.

The risk we face as the church, I believe, is that we end up in a "scarcity survival instinct" that narrows our view. Here, decisions are made from fear and anxiety that there isn't enough.

Perhaps there is some fear and anxiety amongst us as we gather for this Synod.

It feels as if our diocese has come to a juncture. There are decisions to be made about our resources, and our mission. Uncomfortable decisions.

Our conversations over the last several years have been leading us here. We could wash the nets and go home, sleep, and hope that tomorrow will be better. But, God has other ideas.

Perhaps we are being called into deep waters – or deeper waters still. Whatever the outcome of our time together, that challenge we face is to not be overwhelmed about it all. And I say *challenge* because it is hard not to, if I'm honest.

In his book, *Facing Decline, Finding Hope*, Jeffrey Johns observes that so often in the church we think that an increase in finances will fix our manifold woes, but asserts that financial decline can actually help us be more discerning about where God is actually calling us.

Jones encourages us to ask new questions. Instead of “*how do we structure*” or more desperately, “*how do we survive*”, we can ask, “*how do we serve?*”

‘What would happen,’ he asks, ‘if we were to set aside our focus on survival for a bit and began to ask ourselves how best we can serve those in our community who need us?’⁴

Asking this question *will* mean making decisions about where we direct our energy and how we allocate our resources, but these decisions must all come in the framework of “*will this help us in our mission to be the people of God in and for our community?*”

This is what an Abundance mindset looks like.

In the words of Walter Bruggemann, ‘The gospel story of abundance asserts that we originated in the magnificent, inexplicable love of a God who loved the world into generous being.’ ‘Wouldn’t it be wonderful,’ he goes on to say, ‘...if we ‘came to a common realisation that the real issue

confronting us is whether the news of God’s abundance can be trusted in the face of the story of scarcity?’⁵

An Abundance mindset is not just about the privileged reality of having stuff, just as much as a scarcity mindset is not about *not* having stuff. The challenge becomes how to maintain an abundance mindset when all the evidence suggests otherwise.

When Jesus asks him to put down the net again, Simon Peter is weary, yet obedient. The result is compelling – despite the weariness, he responds because the call is something he cannot refuse. Indeed, when he sees the result, it is enough to make him reassess his whole life.

For the men who walked away from their catch to follow Jesus, the assets were not the primary thing. The mission was not about the abundance *per se* but what the abundance pointed to.

⁴ Jeffrey Jones, Facing decline Finding Hope p 84

⁵ Walter Bruggemann, article, The Liturgy of Abundance, the Myth of Scarcity.

For Simon Peter the abundance of the catch was an encounter with the divine. And decision to leave his catch and follow Jesus came in response to encountering the abundance of God.

Some of us may feel we have laboured long for little result, Like Simon Peter and the disciples, we are weary. Yet we are a community of faith held together by abundant love, abundant grace, and abundant hope.

The move from scarcity to abundance begins by shifting our focus away from what we **can't** do, to what we **can** do. God has called us, as individuals and communities to serve God's beautiful and broken world. Together, we can seek to discern where the abundance lies. Sam Wells says that sometimes we need each other's help to sharpen our perceptions for the ways God is sending abundance.⁶

This is no more important than when the day has been long and exhausting. One of the great gifts of a Diocesan church is that we have each other. Without overworking the metaphor,

we are in this boat together. And, the Spirit is with us. The reason we are here on a dark Thursday evening in Spring, at the end of a long day is not just for ourselves but for those whom God calls us to reach – whether they are at the margins, or in the realms of plenty.

The disciples were called to deep waters beyond their knowledge. They didn't know what to expect, but even with weary arms, they knew how to throw the nets. *That's what they knew how to do.* We don't know what to expect either. *But there are things we know how to do.*

Despite living in a season of scarcity, we can still be communities of abundance: Generous with the good news of the Gospel, our hospitality, our compassion and care.

We are still a church where the abundance we experience through faith, helps us – even compels us – to put out our nets again so that we may say in both words and actions there is “something to see here folks”. **Amen**

The Rev'd Sarah Moss, Diocesan Ministry Educator.

⁶ Sam Wells, Finding Abundance in Scarcity