

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Dearly beloved,

Today we mark the 4th Sunday after Pentecost. Since these numbered Sundays between Pentecost and Advent do not concern a particular mystery of Our Lord's life such as His birth, death or resurrection, the Gospels relate various episodes in His life. Today's Gospel recounts the calling of Peter, James, and John, Jesus' best loved apostles, by means of a miraculous catch of fish.

There are two miraculous catches of fish in the Gospels: this one from Luke at the beginning of Our Lord's public ministry, and the other from John after the Resurrection. They have some notable similarities in their details: the apostles fish all night long without any success; then Jesus appears and tells them to try again and then they catch an overwhelming amount. The difference regards Jesus' location, for in the first occurrence, Our Lord is with the apostles in the boat, while in the second, he is on the shore. As St. Gregory the Great explains, Jesus' position in the two miracles is relative to his human nature, for in the first occurrence he is toiling with the apostles on the earth, willingly subject to the threat of suffering and death, but after his Resurrection, he is impassible and therefore stands on the land. For the sea represents the changeability of this life and its misery and sorrow, while the land signifies the firmness and peace of the life to come.

The significance of this event for our own lives is that we often seem to labor to no purpose, to fish all night and come up empty. But these accounts of the apostles show us that this is a normal feature of the Christian life and so, with God's grace, must be accepted and understood as much as possible. Peter, James and John were fishermen; fishing was the way they earned their livelihood; therefore they were doing God's will in going fishing. Though they caught nothing, if their labor was done with a worthy intention in mind, their labor was pleasing to God, even if it was not pleasing to them because of its perceived lack of success.

Then Jesus appears and tells them to resume doing the same thing they had been doing, and in an instant they achieve much more than they accomplished in hours of toil. Moreover, this happened to the apostles twice, at very different stages in their faith in Our Lord, both when they needed a miracle to increase their faith, as we heard today, and when they had sufficient faith to risk their lives for Christ after his Resurrection. So this movement of God's Providence happens to all, beginners and advanced. Why, then, does God choose to operate in this way?

He acts in this way to counter our pride and to increase our humility. He told Adam that because of his sin his work would occur by the sweat of his brow and that the ground will yield thistles and thorns instead of the crops he desired. Though we are sanctified by grace, we still bear this penalty, even when our intentions are good. This is so we will not attribute the good things that occur to ourselves but to God. And once we believe this with firmness, He can more readily work through us, for He knows we will not attribute the good achieved to ourselves, but to Him, and thus increase in love and gratitude rather than in pride and self-love. The greatest Saints are those who rely most upon God, fully aware of their own weakness and fragility.

Thus a certain degree of failure helps us to grow in holiness, and God knowing this, brings it about more than we would like. If we succeeded each time we set out to accomplish something, we would grow

further from God rather than closer to Him. Hence the age-old problem of why the wicked prosper is answered in a way by realizing that as they prosper they grow more certain of their own worth and less reliant upon God and thus further and further from Him, which is the worst penalty a human being can suffer. Whenever pride increases, our distance from God also increases. This is also why the self-assuredness and seeming invincibility of youth yields to the struggles and failures of middle age: if it were not for this, no man would be saved. Pride would reign and grace would be despised.

And so it is that fruitless labor is not a sign of rejection but of divine favor, provided we give ourselves over to the mystery. Our failure should remind us that perhaps we did not begin by asking God to bless our work or that we relied too much upon our own strength. And if our intentions were wholly good in undertaking the work, then we should wait patiently for His blessing upon it, and be grateful when it comes.

Therefore it is providential that this Gospel falls on the same liturgical day as Father's Day. Parenting is both the most important and most difficult task in the world, and it often means one labors night after night and seems to catch nothing. Children are loved and taught good things and disciplined, and yet it often yields bad behavior. But if Christ is allowed to work, that is, if parents give Our Lord the opportunity to dwell in their children's souls through grace and the sacraments and strive to provide an environment in which they can grow in love of God and in virtue, there will be a miraculous catch.

There will be always be failure in parenting, for sinners are raising sinners, but better that there be failure and subsequent reliance upon God than apparent success and subsequent pride. Better to entrust your fears to the Lord in prayer than rely upon your own ingenuity and prudence. That is also why even Saints have had badly behaved children, to show even them, that as St. Paul says, "I planted, Apollo watered, but God gave the increase." If we were granted sure success in the formation of minds and hearts, we would have cause for the greatest degree of pride, for there is nothing greater in a human life than to be the cause of the holiness of another person, but it would also be a foolish pride for only God can do such things; we merely give ourselves to Him as willing but damaged instruments. Moreover, it is good for parents to realize that their plan for their children might not be the same as the divine plan; He can make good come out of evil more infallibly than can human parents and so He often does something much more marvelous in the heart of the child than a parent could wish or imagine. Augustine is a case in point: St. Monica only wanted him to be married properly and return to the Faith; instead a sinner and heretic became a monk and one of the greatest theologians the Church has known.

Even for those of us who are not parents, there is still a lesson in the apparently fruitless labor of Peter, James and John. Among the desert fathers, there is an adage that we are our own parents, for we, by our cooperation or rejection of grace, give birth to virtue and vice within our own souls. And there is also the fact that most of us begin to make meaningful, conscious moral choices only when we leave home and realize that if we want to be prudent, just, courageous and temperate we must choose such things; our parents' suggestions and coercion no longer suffice. In this place where we shape our own character, many times our work to cultivate virtue, seems to be nothing more than a pointless exercise. And if this is the case, we should ask ourselves what God is teaching us through our seeming lack of growth in holiness.

The first question to ask is, do we pray? Do we pray for specific things? How many people go on a diet to lose weight, which is to grow in temperance, and never think to ask God for His grace to practice self-

control? And if we do pray, do we pray consistently and from the heart, truly humbling ourselves? And if we have done these things, then we are called to trust in divine Providence—the catch of fish will come, but we may have to go fishing a few more nights before we are given success. This patient waiting on the Lord has many fruitful results: we learn to have mercy on others who struggle to attain virtue, we gain wisdom we can share with others who are discouraged by their seeming lack of progress, and most of all, we learn that when we are weak, we are strong. No less a spiritual giant than St. Paul said when writing to the Corinthians, “And to keep me from being too elated by the abundance of revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to harass me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I besought the Lord about this, that it should leave me; but he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong.”

Today, then, we should try to imagine the prayer of Peter as coming from the lips of a parent rather than a fisherman, a parent trying to bring forth the fruit of virtue either in his own soul or in the souls of others. “Lord, I have labored all night, but I have had no success. I toiled out of love for you; may you bless my work. Please give your blessing for souls are at stake; forgive my negligence and give glory to your name by overcoming it. Help me to grow in humility and gratitude; make me your instrument.” May the Lord graciously hear our prayer and grant us to be counted among Peter, James, John and all the Saints and thus live with Him forever in the kingdom of heaven, in the New Jerusalem.