

# From The Pulpit

by Rev. Donald M. Clark

I GO A-FISHING

Text: Simon Peter Saith Unto Them, "I Go a-Fishing." They Say Unto Him, "We Also Go With Thee." They Went Forth, and Entered Into a Ship Immediately; and That Night They Caught Nothing. John 21:3.

"I go a-fishing," said Simon Peter. How did he say it? With the elation of a small boy running with fishing pole and line to a favorite stream? Did he say it as wise men would, "While we are waiting for the Master, let us get on with our everyday job"? Or did he say it with despair, as a man who feels compelled to desert a cause: "It's no use waiting any longer. I'm going back to my old job. I'm going fishing."



REV. D. M. CLARK

Most Bible readers love the fourth Gospel. It moves so simply, so hauntingly in its beauty. Written at the turn of the second century of our era, it

was known as the Spiritual Gospel; by spiritual, the early churchmen meant mystical, symbolical, allegorical. This Gospel of John is perhaps the only surviving specimen of a literature with which the ancients were familiar.

The Gospel as originally planned must have ended with the twentieth chapter. The motive of its composition has been stated: "That ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through His name" (20:31). It was a fitting, consistent ending. Yet this twenty-first chapter -- this Epilogue -- was added by the author of the Gospel himself. He is an evangelist before he is an artist; therefore he asks, "What is the successful condition of successful discipleship? What is the mission of the followers of the Master?"

So in the first fourteen verses of this chapter, St. John helps us to know how the Lord operates through His Body, the Church. The disciples are back in Galilee. The only change from the old days is that they are a company united by the fact of their discipleship. Here are Peter, and the sons of Zebedee, as of old; one of the two unnamed is likely to have been Andrew, making the old quartet. But now there are also Thomas and Nathanael Simon Peter, the Big Fisherman, as so often, takes the lead. Simon Peter saith unto them, "I go a-fishing." The others decided to join him.

It was night, and the best time for fishing, but they caught nothing. In the dim dawn of the day -- so that they could not recognize who it was -- Jesus appears on the shore, tells them to cast on the right side of the ship. Obedient to this authoritative stranger, they do as He commands and the result is a huge catch. John recognizes their Master. Peter, the first to act, impulsively plunges toward shore. And they partake of breakfast, bringing in some of the freshly caught fish for their meal.

There is allegory here, but this is not to say that there is not historical basis for it. Somehow, somewhere, there grew up in the early church the tradition of a great catch of fish, by some of the disciples on the Lake of Galilee, associated with the presence of Jesus on the shore.

John says that after Peter cast himself into the sea to go to Jesus, the others came in the dinghy (for they were not far from land, about 200 cubits off). They find a meal prepared on the shore; nothing miraculous about that. They might have prepared it before they went out in the boat; or Jesus Himself might have arranged it. Simon Peter goes back at the Master's request, and drags up the net to land. When they count the fish, there are "a hundred and fifty and three." There is unmistakable symbolism in the number of the fish. Jerome says that Latin and Greek naturalists declare there were 153 known species of fish. Therefore what St. John wished to say was that the disciples of



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Jesus, if they were true to His spirit, would proclaim an inclusive and universal Gospel. When His followers have obeyed His command, the Lord Himself offers them refreshment and sustenance. As of old, Christ is their host. "Come and have breakfast." He provides the bread, they provide the fish. This giving of the bread and fish to them by Jesus is a meal in miniature which corresponds to the spiritual feeding on Christ as the bread and wine of God. Such spiritual nourishment is the first essential in all true discipleship. "Without Christ we can do nothing."

"I go a-fishing." Did Peter say, in effect, "It's no use waiting any longer for Jesus. I'm going back to my old job." Let us assume that he did. He was impulsive, impatient. Dejection follows elation. Thrilled by the Easter day appearance, he grew depressed over not seeing the Lord again. When he smelled the lake, the boats, the nets, and thought of quiet nights under the stars out in the boat, did all the love of his

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old craft sweep over him? "I go a-fishing." Peter, then was in danger of deserting Jesus. But Jesus had no intention of leaving Peter! Satan tempted by using the boats, the sea and the fishing, when Peter said, "I'm going off to fish." But the Master was watching over this dear, unstable follower of His. The vision of the Lord recovered Peter.

Have you been tempted to give up faith because of God's delays? Are you tempted to go back to the old ways? Have the days been dull, drab, dead? "Is Jesus alive? Is God real? Is religion worthwhile?" Let's go fishing. We may go back to the old ways, but we'll have little joy in them; by some word or event, the Master will reveal Himself to us again. If you've toiled all night and caught nothing of spiritual worth, hold on, and hold out! The night may break at any moment; dawn will come a glimmering, and you'll find the presence on the shore near you, and the direction you need to gather a treasure of value.

"I go a-fishing." But what if Peter meant it in another, totally different sense? No suggestion of desertion in it, but a reminder to his comrades that in the days of waiting there were duties to be done, jobs to be gotten on with; they had to provide for their families by honest toil. When the vision fails you can wait for it in doing the thing which needs to be done.

You may know a fleeting spiritual splendor, a mountain-top transfiguration; but most days are ordinary days, they do not catch us up into paradise. Being a Christian consists of doing the daily task, not seeking the heavenly ecstasy. "Blessed are those servants whom the Lord when He cometh shall find so doing." We can work; we can worship; we can read our Bibles,

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