

19th Sunday after Pentecost 10/11/2015

Check Your Bait

Today, with the theme of our Gospel Lesson 'Fishing for Men', I would like to do a bit of fishing with you. I know we have some very avid anglers in our congregation who, I am sure will agree that good fishing often depends on knowing what bait to use. Bait is, by definition, an attractant. As with fish, so with people. If people do not find the Gospel attractive there is little hope that they will struggle to acquire its blessings.

At our recent Young Adult Retreat I shared a recently published book called *Exposing Myths About Christianity* – a guide to answering 145 viral lies and legends. The premise of the book is that for many years now the public mind in America has been fed a steady diet of lies about and distortions of Christianity with the goal of creating a negative public sentiment about Christianity generally. I agree entirely with this observation. I am old enough to remember when Christianity was treated with respect in movies, books, music and the arts. Since the cultural revolution of the 1960's this has no longer been the case.

For years now, everywhere one turns, Christianity has been and continues to be lampooned, mocked, and derided as hypocritical, bigoted, close minded and culturally backward. And that's just the mild stuff.

The waters of the public mind are more polluted in this sense than anything we see in the physical environment – and that's saying a lot. Just as what happens to fish in the polluted lakes, streams and even the ocean, human beings are suffering and even dying spiritually. Our jobs today, as fishers of men may be seen then as similar to those who work so hard to rescue stranded whales and dolphin or other endangered species.

Now our great master fisherman and spiritual physician, Jesus Himself, has told us very clearly – do not think to correct your wounded brother or sister until you have corrected yourself. Assist each other, yes. Help each other with encouragement and bear each other's burdens, yes. But do not attempt to remove the splinter in your friend's eye without attending to the beam in your

own. St. Seraphim of Sarov also, like so many other saints taught that if you really want to help other people the most important thing you can do is, as he put it “acquire the spirit of peace and thousands around you will be saved”. We Christians have, of course, in one sense already acquired the spirit of peace. We have received through the mysteries of Baptism and Chrismation the gift of the Holy Spirit. Experience teaches, however, that this gift can and often does ‘get buried in the earth’ of worldly concerns, troubles, the re-appearance of fallen passions in our hearts and unhealthy ideas in our minds. Christian life is the beginning of a life-long war with these “sins” in ourselves. Holy Apostle Paul speaks quite clearly about this in his Epistles.

The wisdom of the Church is wonderfully helpful with all this. She teaches us that the Christian life is dynamic, not static, and provides for us a way of life that enables us to expect and experience victory in this war both in the future life and in this one. It is surely one of the great evils of our age that anti-Christian pollution prevents so many people from finding this spiritual hospital that God has established for their healing. Even those who would turn to God and to Jesus Himself are subtly and not so subtly encouraged to go it alone. We hear it all the time; I believe in God, I am a spiritual person, I love Jesus but I don’t need a church or even a religion at all. Yet, according to the Scriptures, it is exactly the Church that Christ came to establish. The Church is the inn, to which the Good Samaritan takes those that he rescues; the hospital for souls that exists as an objective reality in this world, as well as in the next, and which Christ promises will endure until “He comes again” at the end of the ages.

Within this Church we find medicines and therapies for our souls. We also find physicians, nurses and health care aids that help us to recognize the true nature of our specific illnesses - diagnosis. They can also prescribe and administer the course of treatment that is most advantageous to our well-being and spiritual progress. Over the next several weeks I think it will be helpful if we explore some of these medicines and therapies, particularly with the aim of developing, (if we have not already done so), a positive appreciation of them.

One of the first things I want to point out to you is something I have talked about previously and which was something Metropolitan Kallistos Ware also mentioned when Fr. Peter and I, together with other clergy from upstate NY and Canada met with him recently. The Metropolitan pointed out that one of the important functions of contemporary saints, saints of our own time in the history of the Church, is to help point out the best approaches for evangelization, (that is – fishing for men), in our own times. Speaking to the issue of Confession and spiritual direction, he pointed out the fact that in the Church there have been, traditionally, two major metaphorical systems for discussing this subject – and its practice.

The first of these metaphors and the one most commonly familiar to Americans is that of a system of laws. Righteousness is keeping the law. Sin is breaking the law. In the religious sense of this way of thinking about our relationship with God, God is the Law-giver and Judge. Those who keep the law are blessed by God. Those who break the law are punished. Forgiveness is a freedom from punishment. The Old Testament of the Bible is heavily, (but not exclusively), loaded towards this idea. In the New Testament the second great metaphor makes a much stronger appearance.

This second metaphor is that of health vs sickness and can be called therapeutic. Sin is sickness of the soul resulting in destructive behaviors while righteousness is health of the soul producing a virtuous life. God is the Physician who sacrifices Himself to bring healing even to those whose free choices have caused their own sickness. Forgiveness is Gods refusal to stop loving us.

Metropolitan Kallistos pointed out that both of these metaphors have meaning and usefulness but added that in our times he believed that the therapeutic model was the best one to emphasize. There is, in fact, quite an Orthodox renaissance under way that has adopted this approach both for evangelism and for spiritual counsel. Elder Sophrony, (of blessed memory), newly canonized Saints Porphyrios and Paisius, Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos and Metropolitan Kallistos himself are all strong voices, teaching and preaching the Orthodox Gospel in this context. The success of their teaching is

obvious. Books about St. Porphyrios, Elder Sophrony, St. Paisios fly off the shelves and the writings of spokesmen like Metropolitan Kallistos and Metropolitan Hierotheos are in great demand. My point here is that people are finding their teaching and example attractive, despite so much negative propaganda towards Christianity generally. They have found the right bait for our times.

Fr. Peter and I have been aware of these developments and are generally supportive of this approach. This may seem rather theoretical to you but believe me, it makes a big difference in very practical ways. As I said, Metropolitan Kallistos was speaking about confession and spiritual direction when he spoke to these two metaphors. Fr. Peter introduced the subject of Confession in his sermon last week. This is a very timely and important subject for us as it deals very much with one of the more important means of therapy for those already in the Church, a means by which we can regularly attend to the beams in our own eyes. We will talk more about this.

For today I will end with a question. What is your way of thinking about your Christian faith and its practice? Is your thinking legalistic or therapeutic or perhaps some mixture of the two? At the beginning of this sermon I mentioned my intention of doing a bit of fishing with you. We who are drawn to the Gospel are both catchers and catch. The more we are drawn to Christ ourselves the more likely will we be able to draw others to Him as well. If things are not going as well as we might like, if the fish aren't biting, if we ourselves are not biting, I would suggest; check your bait.