

## Homily for the Fifth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year C) 7<sup>th</sup> February 2010

At the close of the Jubilee Year 2000 the then Pope, John Paul II, chose a phrase from today's gospel to be a kind of motto that would guide us into the future. The phrase he chose was *Duc in altum* - put out into the deep. As the years go by, I think perhaps this will be one of the things for which John Paul is most remembered, because especially in the latter years of his pontificate he seems to have loved using this little phrase. In itself this is a great tribute to his faith and trust in God. This is, after all, hardly an old man's phrase. After a long life, and a long time as Pope which had seen so many changes both within and outside the Church, one could have forgiven him for choosing something a bit more sedentary, a little more static, rather less challenging; but no, he did something which demands great faith, especially from someone of his age, he looked to the future with hope, confidence and joy.

The future can often seem a rather frightening place, because there is so much uncertainty there, but this little motto is something that we can hold onto and use as our key to mastering the challenge of the future. Let's look a little deeper into this story to see what is going on.

The scene is set at the lakeside, with the people crowding closer and closer around Jesus because they are so anxious to hear the word of God. In a world that seems either indifferent or even hostile to the Word of God this seems hard to imagine, but it is still true that deep within every human being, whether they realise it or not, there is a longing for this definitive word, this word that is utterly authentic. The word of God is as powerful, as true, as it ever was; people need it as much as they ever did. The challenge for us is to find ways to bring the two together. But that is something of an aside. The scene is by the lakeside. The crowds are pressing around Jesus, so he sits in a boat a little way from the shore so that he can have some space, and he teaches them. Once he has finished he turns to Simon Peter and tells him to *Duc in altum* - put out into the deep! Clearly his teaching has made a deep impression on Simon, because it is at this stage that Simon calls Jesus 'Master'; he does this on the strength of what Jesus has said, long before he does anything remarkable. Putting out into the deep seems utterly pointless to Simon. They worked all night and caught nothing; if they

catch nothing at night, the normal time for fishing, what hope have they of catching anything in the day? But all the same, he does as the Lord has said, and he is rewarded with a huge catch of fish.

Simon must have wanted nothing more than to go home to bed. It has been a long and fruitless night, his chores are over, so now it is time to rest. The nets have all been washed, but now he has to use them all over again. All the same, there is something about this challenge to head out into deep waters that he cannot quite resist. He has heard the word of God proclaimed, and somehow this has set him free to believe. As Catholics we are sometimes still a bit unsure about the Bible. We do not know quite where to begin with it, and we are a bit suspicious that it may be, well, not very interesting. Today's gospel gives us a little jolt. The story starts with Peter and his friends listening to Jesus. It is only once they have heard what he has to say that they are ready to act. Listening to the word of God is the starting point for whatever we do, and so the first thing that this story does is to challenge us to examine the place that the scriptures have in our lives. It was what Jesus said that made Peter call him 'Master'; it was what Jesus *said* that persuaded him to put out into the deep. We need to make listening to the scriptures a real priority, whether we do that by reading the Bible, or by reading the readings for each day's mass, or by following some course, or perhaps by getting together with friends to read the scriptures together. Perhaps this Lent could be an opportunity to sit down and read. If you want to get closer to the Lord, why not set aside a couple of hours and read one of the gospels through from beginning to end, all in one sitting. There is probably no simpler way to deepen our understanding of what the life of Jesus is about than to do this. Suddenly all the little stories that we know on their own fit into place and find their context. "*Indeed, the word of God is living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating even between soul and spirit, joints and marrow, and able to discern reflections and thoughts of the heart*". Heb 4.12.

Once Jesus has finished speaking to the crowd Jesus turns to Peter and tells him to *Duc in altum*. So, against all his instincts, he heads out onto the lake again, but this time there is something new. As well as his fellow fishermen, in the boat with him is Jesus Christ, and this is what makes all the difference. Simon accepts an almost

ludicrous challenge and all turns out far better than he could ever have hoped for. What is so important here is not just the fact that Simon does what Jesus says, but the fact that he knows that in doing so he is carrying the Lord with him. Simon takes his boat out into deep water, but he takes Jesus out into the deep with him too. When Pope John Paul began to use this little phrase, he had the courage to do so because he knew that he would never have to put out into the deep alone, he would always have Jesus with him. Jesus is not standing on the shore telling us to put out into the deep, he is standing in the boat with us. He is not saying go away into the deep, but take me with you into the deep. This is a very important difference. All of us have times when we are faced with difficult decisions, and often it is very tempting to stick with the secure predictability of dry land; but Jesus invites us to have courage, to risk the deep water because that is where the fish are to be found; like Simon, he asks us to put out into the deep - but always he also deeply desires that we take him with us.