

“What you see and hear depends a good deal on where you are standing: it also depends on sort of person you are.” This is a quote from one of the books in C.S. Lewis’ fantasy series *The Chronicles of Narnia* titled *The Magician’s Nephew*. It’s a story of how the land of Narnia was created and the doorways between Narnia and our world were established. The quote comes from the part of the story where Aslan, the Great Lion and – spoiler alert- Jesus, was creating Narnia from nothing. No matter how old or young you are, there is something imaginatively delightful about Lewis’ description of Aslan singing the land, the trees, and the animals into being. Aslan was not alone when he created Narnia; he was watched by several people from our world, who got there by magic. This magic was discovered by a man from London named Uncle Andrew, who is one of the story’s villains. What made Uncle Andrew a bad guy was he was selfish; he lied and manipulated children to do what he was afraid to do and suffered from delusions of grandeur, thinking himself a much wiser and nobler character than he was.

As Lewis described the creation of Narnia, he let us see the events from the perspectives of the children who were there and from Uncle Andrew. The children felt safe, even though they were in a world they had never known and watching events they could hardly understand. They experienced awe and wonder. Uncle Andrew watched from a distance because he was afraid and selfish. He saw the animals Aslan created and gifted with speech as creatures that would get in the way of him exploiting the land of Narnia to make him wealthy and famous.

While the children saw beauty and wonder and heard laughter and joy, Uncle Andrew saw a threat and heard violent cries from the animals. Lewis summed up this difference in perspective by writing, “What you see and hear depends a good deal on where you are standing: it also depends on what sort of person you are.”

This quote could also apply to how we read the Bible. It is not easy to read the Bible without our preconceived biases and prejudices influencing what we see. Take, for example, today’s Gospel reading where Jesus was near a large lake, and so many people were surrounding him, he had to get into a boat and push out into the water to be heard. The way the sound moves over water created a natural amplifier. So, Jesus didn’t do a miracle, he used the natural resources available to him. The author of the Gospel didn’t tell us what Jesus taught, only that when he was finished teaching, he told the fishermen whose boat he was in

to go fishing again, this time in deeper waters. The fishermen were tired and grumpy from working all night, which by the way was the common practice for local fishing industries in that time and place because that was when the fish were more likely to be caught. Yet, despite all their hard work doing what they always did, they hadn't caught a single fish. Still, they did as Jesus said, and that is when a miracle occurred: so many fish they had to get the other fishermen in the other boat to help them and both boats almost sank from the weight of all those fish. The ridiculous amount of fish impressed Simon, who by the way is the same person as Peter before Jesus changed his name, that he exclaimed he was not worthy of such abundance and generosity. Then Jesus issued another command, saying that Simon needed to stop fishing for fish and fish for people, after which Simon and the other fishermen left everything to follow Jesus.

For many commentators, the most impressive or important part of this story is all those fish. So many fish the boats almost sank from the weight of them. Many a sermon has been preached about catching people like so many fish, people that will fill up the pews of churches to overflowing and fill up the collection plates to give church members a feeling of security about meeting budgets. But what if that interpretation comes from a perspective of fear? Fear of the church losing status in society, fear of losing money, fear that leads to seeing people as resources to be used for gain or security instead of beloved children of God.

What if we looked at it from a different perspective, one that, like the people in today's Gospel, can see those fish for what they were: a miracle that points to who Jesus is. The abundance of fish did not make the fishermen rich beyond their wildest dreams. The abundance of fish did not make the fishermen celebrities who wrote books on how to be the best fishermen. The fish were not really for the benefit of the fishermen. The fish pointed to the wider community beyond the boats, nets, and lake. There was more than enough fish for lots of people, not just for one day, but for many days. The abundance of fish points to the truth that there is a world bigger than the lake out there.

This might make us ask, if this event in the Gospel isn't about the fish, what is it about? Maybe it's about the waters. When Jesus told the fishermen to go back to work at a time of day when there wasn't supposed to be any good fishing, he told them to fish in deep waters. To go where they were not used to fishing. To try something different, something out of their comfort zone and not routine. Perhaps those deep waters represent the parts of the world that reveal life is more complex than we assume, where solutions are rarely easy, wherever we find ourselves out of our comfort zones; where things aren't so certain, and the way we've always done things just doesn't work like it used to.

Maybe it isn't about the fish. Maybe it is about the deep waters.

During the season of Epiphany, the Church helps us by challenging us to look beyond our preconceived biases and prejudices to deepen our understanding of Jesus. To look at the events in the Gospels and see how Jesus manifests God incarnate, God with us.

To the fisherman cleaning their nets after a bad night of hard work and nothing to show for it, Jesus revealed God is with them by challenging them to go deeper. Not to get more fish, but to recognize their failed work didn't mean God had abandoned them nor was God punishing them for some sin. God was with them, even when their work didn't pay.

In its fear and grief, the church can mistake shrinking attendance and money for punishment too. Religious magazines and secular newspapers alike are full of opinion articles blaming clergy, blaming laypersons, blaming institutions, blaming the sins of the Church for its shrinking status in a growing secular society. And it is easy to get on the bandwagon of despair. I'm not saying the church is innocent of causing harm. Far from it. We need to name the harm our fears and hurt can and have caused as individuals, a parish, an institution and confess, and repent. This is not easy; it takes courage, and it takes faith, like it did for Simon.

Which is why there is so much hope for everyone in today's Gospel. Jesus didn't abandon the fishermen, nor did he criticize them for not paying attention when he was teaching. Instead, he showed them God was with them by challenging them to go deeper. This frightened them, and it can be frightening when God calls us beyond our comfort zone, to consider doing things differently, to figure out how to balance tradition and adapting to the changes in the world. Yet, in those deep waters of uncertainty, God is there too. Jesus didn't send the fishermen out alone he went with them, not to punish them, but to show them the wonders of God's love.

God is still with us, perhaps manifesting in the very challenges we face as the pandemic continues, as our neighborhood changes, and our parish changes. We can choose to see these challenges as punishment, or as Jesus calling us to go deeper with him into the love of God, which may take us to unexpected places. This revelation might give us courage to look for additional ways to reach out to our neighbors, to explore new ways to raise the necessary resources we need for our ministries, and in all these see that we are not alone, God is with us. It all depends on our point of view.