

3rd Saturday of Lent A - Men's Conference, Calvert Hall

Fish Stories

We have to admit it: sometimes we like to tell fish stories. When we get back from a fishing trip and tell our buddies how it went, we may find ourselves exaggerating the size of the fish we actually caught, not to mention the one that got away when no one was looking. By the time the coffee break is over, we may have described how we singlehandedly landed a large barracuda with an ordinary rod and reel.

Fish stories aren't just about fish: people boast about all kinds of things. For example, people boast about the performance of their investments, or about the academic and sports performance of their children. And the point of such boasting is not only to say how we'll we've done, it is also to say that we've done better than everyone else who is listening to us. And let me share a secret with you. Sometimes when bishops get together, we tell fish stories about how well things are going in our dioceses. If all those stories were true, the Kingdom of God would already have come and gone and there would be no need for the Second Coming!

Fish stories, of course, usually have a grain a truth. We may exaggerate the size of the fish we caught, but chances are we really did catch something. And most people know a fish story when they hear one, most especially wives and children and our colleagues. They are likely to say of us, "Well, there you go again!" The trouble comes when we start to believe our own rhetoric, that is, when we convince ourselves that we are better than we are. Self-deluded people generally make a lot of mistakes and treat others badly. Fish stories can be dangerous.

The Pharisee

I mention our tendency to tell fish stories because in the Gospel, we are taken to a synagogue where we find a Pharisee at prayer. He is telling God a fish story. He is boasting before God about how good he is. He's telling God that he prays, fasts, and is generous with his money. He's telling God that he abstains from doing bad things. And, the Pharisee goes on to say that he is a lot better than tax collector in the back pew.

Like all fish stories, the Pharisee's story contains more than a grain of truth. In all likelihood, the Pharisee did indeed fast, pray, and tithe, but he did those things not for God but rather to win the admiration of others. What's more, the Pharisee harbored the illusion that he made himself good by his own good deeds. In effect, the Pharisee told the God who is the source of every blessing that he, the Pharisee, was a religiously self-made man. And as we see in other parts of the Gospel, the public behavior of the Pharisees appeared to be good but what they did in private was often another matter. Undeterred, the Pharisee has clearly believed his own rhetoric, so much so, that he brings it to God in prayer. We would like to think that God was amused by the Pharisee's boastful prayer. But the Gospel says the Pharisee went home "unjustified". He went home thinking he was holy but in fact he was on the outs with God.

The Tax Collector

Meanwhile, the publican, the tax collector remained in the back pew. If he had a fish story, it was this: he was fishing for the wrong things in the wrong pond. He was taking money from the Israelites to support the Roman Empire. He had earned his living by being in league with the oppressors of his own people.

The publican had no illusions about that. He did not dare even to raise his eyes to heaven. He had offered God no favorable report about himself. All he could say was, "Be merciful to me, O God, a sinner!" The publican may have done many things wrong but he was right about his own need for God's mercy. And he was right to approach God with a humble and contrite heart. Somewhere along the way he had learned the truth, "a humble and contrite heart, O God, you will not spurn." The Gospel tells us that the tax collector went home "justified". He experienced the joy of being liberated of his sins and the possibility opened up before him of living life a new way - living as a true son of the heavenly Father and as a witness to his love.

The Upshot

In what condition will we go home? Today we have gathered in very large numbers, nearly 1,000 of us. We have heard some wonderful talks beginning with Cardinal Wuerl's and have entered into discussion and fellowship with those around you about the things that really matter - your relationship with God, your families, and all those God sends into your life.

Many of you have experienced the liberating power of the Sacrament of Penance as you confessed your sins and opened your hearts to God's forgiveness. Confession of sins not only to God but to the priest is important because that is one of the ways we come *not* to believe our own fish stories; it's one of the ways we are persuaded *not* to believe our own rhetoric but instead to ask for the grace to see ourselves as God sees us. Like the publican, you uttered the prayer, "Have mercy on me, O God, a sinner," and experienced the liberating power of God's love - revealed by Jesus on the Cross and communicated to us by the Holy Spirit.

Freed from your sins the possibility opens up of living your faith with new conviction, commitment, and joy. Far from imagining ourselves as self-righteous we have discovered the joy of being loved by Christ, of knowing that he died to save us from our sins, that he walks with us and our families in our daily lives, and continually leads us to ever deeper discipleship and towards eternal life.

No wonder Pope Benedict called the Sacrament of Reconciliation "the sacrament of the new evangelization". When we repent of our sins as a regular part of our spiritual life by making frequent and fruitful use of the Sacrament of Penance, then we are prepared to go fishing - to be fishers of men - so to bear witness to the Lord's love that your lives will be a living invitation to others to discover the love of Christ that redeems, justifies, restores - and gives a joy like no other.

May God bless us and keep us in his love!