



# CAUGHT BY THE GREAT AFFECTION

## *Bishop's Reflection*

BY THE RT. REV. PAUL-GORDON CHANDLER

Jesus' invitation to Peter and the disciples on the Sea of Galilee to "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people," reminds me of a powerful line in Ernest Hemingway's novella, *The Old Man and the Sea*. In the story, Santiago, the old fisherman, out there on the open sea, says to himself, "Now is the time to think of only one thing. That which I was born for."

Wyoming is known around the world as a place for excellent fishing – and home to some of the finest fly-fishing waters. Of course, the Gospels have a good bit to do with fish. A number of the disciples were fishermen, and twice Jesus helped them catch enormous amounts of fish. Jesus even miraculously feeds over 5000 people with just a few fish. Toward the end of the Gospels, we see Jesus broiling fish on the beach for his disciples, which they eat together for breakfast. And following his resurrection, Jesus ate fish in the upper room where the disciples were hiding, showing them that he was alive and not a ghost.

The fish is a symbol that has great meaning for us in our faith. It is interesting how often one sees the symbol of the fish in ancient Christian ruins in the Middle East and around the Mediterranean. From the 1st century on, the sign of the fish became one of the most popular symbols for the early followers of Christ. It was used on the doors of the homes of Christians and as a symbol on jewelry. It

has even been discovered in the catacombs of Rome. When we lived in Carthage, Tunisia, in North Africa, we saw the fish symbol throughout the Christian mosaics of early antiquity.

Very quickly the fish came to symbolize followers of Christ, and not just Christ himself. The concept was that we are "a school of little fish following the Great Fish." The fish symbol became a kind of sign summing up the heart of their faith. Over the years, Peter became known as the Great Fisherman. And as tradition considers Peter the first bishop of Rome, it has been a nickname for the Pope ever since.

The fish is a beautiful image of our faith, for more than anything else, the Christ-followers in the early church felt "caught." When we think of fishing, we think of "catching fish." During the first several centuries of the church, followers of Christ would often ask the question: "Have you been caught by the Great Affection?" And if someone else were a follower of Christ, their answer would be, "Yes, I have been caught by the Great Affection." They saw Christ as "the Great Affection" of God. God's tremendous affection had been experienced by them in Christ, and they had been caught by God's love and care. It was a divine affection that overwhelmed them, that snatched them up – caught in the net of God's love.



ERNST KARL ZIMMERMAN, TITLED "JESUS WITH THE FISHERMEN," 1888.

I love the profound painting by the 19th century German painter, Ernst Karl Zimmerman, titled *Jesus with the Fishermen*. In it we see Peter, James and John, with their boats in the background, all looking intently into Jesus' eyes. Jesus is tenderly holding Peter's hand. The painting movingly communicates that the disciples see tenderness, love, attention, and life in its fullest dimension, in Jesus. With him, they are experiencing God's beauty as they had never experienced it before.

As followers of Christ, we all have those incidents in our lives where we can perhaps describe it in no other way than being "caught by that Great Affection," a sense of being overwhelmed with God's goodness, love, care and mercy to us. In such moments, the only response that seems adequate is to stand in awe and reverence, adoring our Creator. It is these experiences that catch us all the more, into a growing devotion of following the way of Christ.

Of course, God "catches" each of us with divine affection in different ways, just as fish are caught in all sorts of ways, depending on the fish. God is so wonderfully diverse in the display of that affection.

The sign of the fish and the early Christians' use of it, is a symbol of profound encouragement. When they used the sign of the fish, they were saying, "Like fish, we too have been caught by the Great Affection." What a beautiful understanding of God's concern for each of us.

May we all be caught by the Great Affection, over and over again.

Take hope,  
+ Paul-Gordon