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Fishing on the Sea of Tiberias

JOHN GOLDINGAY

My wife and I spent Easter Week in 1991, which coincided with the week of Unleavened Bread, at Peniel-by-Galilee, the wonderfully-located YMCA guesthouse on the Lake Galilee shore on the north side of Tiberias. Two nights during that week we were awoken in the early hours by strange banging, accompanied by shouting and flashing of lights. Not far from the shore we could see a small boat with two or three men in it. I found it quite easy to forgive the fishermen the interruption to my sleep, because they had given me such a vivid embodiment of stories in the Gospels such as that in John 21 — which was indeed the set Gospel reading in the Church of England Alternative Service Book on one of the days in question. It was quite easy to imagine a character like Peter not caring two hoots whom he awoke in the cause of making a catch.

The jovial co-manager of the guesthouse, Lev Bausch, was less amused at the disturbance of his clients but he was able to explain puzzling features of what was going on. First, banging with a plunger on the surface of the lake is a standard way of scaring fish into the net which the fishermen have already laid in the water. 'Catching human beings' as an alternative to 'catching fish' has always seemed a rather more uncomfortable metaphor than its familiarity allows it to be. It is all the more so now I have seen something of what is involved in Galilee fishing.

There was apparently a further background to the fishermen's going about their task in what might seem a rather anti-social way. The inshore fishing season was near its end. During the winter the fish are inclined to stay near the lake shore, not least on the western side where there are a number of warm springs. But Easter/Passover marks the turn of the seasons, and in the summer the fish move to the middle of the lake, where they are not so accessible to small boats. At this time of year, then, the fishermen are anxiously making the most of the time. I recalled John 21 again. The scene takes place at that time, at a moment not long after Passover and the first Easter. Is one reason for the disciples' urgency the fact that they know that the season for such fishing expeditions is almost over and is its failure therefore a deeper disappointment?

Might it be, also, that the Lake is called simply the Sea of Tiberias here in John 21 (alone), because the scene of the story is the Lake's western side, near Tiberias, where those warm springs are? One may compare John 6:1, where Jesus crosses 'to the other side of the Sea of Galilee (or Tiberias)', but where Codex Bezae — puzzled by the odd Greek — reads '... to the vicinity of Tiberias'.

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