

Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles
Third Sunday after Epiphany – January 25, 2015

Mark 1:14-20

FOR REFLECTION

Symbolism of the Fish

Among the symbols employed by the primitive Christians, that of the fish ranks probably first in importance... The symbol itself may have been suggested by the miraculous multiplication of the loaves and fishes or the repast of the seven Disciples, after the Resurrection, on the shore of the Sea of Galilee (John 21:9), but its popularity among Christians was due principally, it would seem, to the famous acrostic consisting of the initial letters of five Greek words forming the word for fish - **Ichthys** - which words briefly but clearly described the character of Christ ...: *Iesous Christos Theou Yios Soter*, i.e. Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour. **It is not improbable that this Christian formula originated in Alexandria, and was intended as a protest against the pagan apotheosis of the emperors; on a coin from Alexandria of the reign of Domitian (81-96) this emperor is styled *Theou Yios* (Son of God).**

<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06083a.htm>

Fish Power

According to the author, Mark, Jesus, at the beginning of his ministry, was walking along the shore of a freshwater lake called The Sea of Galilee. He saw some commercial fishermen – a lucrative enterprise – and gave them an alternative. “Follow me and I’ll make you fishers of people.” They leapt up and became disciples. If Jesus had actually said this (unlikely, according to most Westar scholars), he was using a metaphor that would capture the imaginations of the fishermen he was luring. Hey, use skills you already have to further a greater cause!

Taking this idea further – if he came across some shepherds he might have said, “Follow me and I’ll make you shepherds of people.” Or walking among farmworkers he might have said, “Follow me and you will be harvesting people.”

But Jesus was an itinerant – not the leader of an institution requiring converts in order to stay in business. So the idea that the purpose of following Jesus is to fish for converts comes later – when the early church was forming and the gospels were being written to cast a theological net that made sense to certain groups of people.

Water baptism, practiced by immersion in the early church, created a parallel between fish and converts. Second-century theologian Tertullian put it this way: "We, little fishes, after the image of our Ichthys, Jesus Christ, are born in the water."

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ch/asktheexpert/oct26.html>

The fish as a symbol of the Christian movement after the whole Easter debacle is confirmed. And there are myriad reasons and explanations for the use of the two intersecting curves (often with Greek letters) that we recognize on car windows.

According to tradition, ancient Christians, during their persecution by the Roman Empire in the first few centuries after Christ, used the fish symbol to mark meeting places and tombs, or to distinguish friends from foes:

According to one ancient story, when a Christian met a stranger in the road, the Christian sometimes drew one arc of the simple fish outline in the dirt. If the stranger drew the other arc, both believers knew they were in good company.

—Christianity Today, Elesha Coffman, "Ask The Expert"

The idea of the fish as a secret code certainly sparked my imagination as a young person. And it is interesting to note that in the early 1970's: the "Jesus Fish" was rebirthed... [becoming] an icon of modern Christianity recognized around the world. It was caused through a chain of circumstances. First the Vietnam War caused distrust and peaceful rebellion within the younger generations of Americans and Australians. In 1973 they brought the symbol and message to the Aquarius Rock Festival in Nimbin, Australia. From there it became a household symbol. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ichthys>

The word itself, ΙΧΘΥΣ (Ichthus), Greek for "fish":

...is an acronym/acrostic for "Ιησοῦς Χριστός, Θεοῦ Υἱός, Σωτήρ", (Iēsous Christos, Theou Yios, Sōtēr), which translates into English as "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour".

Iota (i) is the first letter of Iēsous (Ἰησοῦς), Greek for "Jesus".

Chi (ch) is the first letter of Christos (Χριστός), Greek for "anointed".

Theta (th) is the first letter of Theou (Θεου), Greek for "God's", the genitive case of Θεός, Theos, Greek for "God".

Upsilon (y) is the first letter of (h)uios (Υἰός), Greek for "Son".
Sigma (s) is the first letter of sōtēr (Σωτήρ), Greek for "Savior".

This explanation is given among others by **Augustine** in his Civitate Dei, where he notes that the generating sentence " Ἰησοῦς Χρῆστὸς [sic] Θεοῦ Υἱὸς Σωτήρ" has 27 letters, i.e. 3 x 3 x 3, which in that age indicated **power**.
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ichthys>

And much like our own 1970's rebellion against authority:

It is not improbable that this Christian formula originated in Alexandria, and was intended as a protest against the...apotheosis [deification] of the emperors; on a coin from Alexandria of the reign of Domitian (81-96) this emperor is styled Theou Yios (Son of God).
<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06083a.htm>

We are also aware that symbols often have a deeper history that predates our own. The fish has meaning that is rooted in pre-Jesus, pre-Christian movements – in this case, “roots in pagan fertility awareness and sexuality.” In the ancient mythology of northern Syria:

...Ichthys was the offspring son of the ancient Sea goddess Atargatis, and was known in various mythic systems as Tirgata, Aphrodite, Pelagia or Delphine. The word also meant "womb" and "dolphin" in some tongues, and representations of this appeared in the depiction of mermaids. **The fish also a central element in other stories, including the Goddess of Ephesus (who has a fish amulet covering her genital region), as well as the tale of the fish that swallowed the penis of Osiris, and was also considered a symbol of the vulva of Isis.**

Along with being a generative and reproductive spirit in mythology, the fish also has been identified in certain cultures with reincarnation and the life force. Sir James George Frazer noted in his work, "Adonis, Attis, Osiris: Studies in the History of Oriental Religion" (Part Four of his larger work, "The Golden Bough") that **among one group in India, the fish was believed to house a deceased soul, and that as part of a fertility ritual, specific fish is eaten in the belief that it will be reincarnated in a newborn child.**

Well before Christianity, the fish symbol was known as "the Great Mother," a pointed oval sign, the "vesica piscis" or Vessel of the Fish. "Fish" and "womb" were synonymous terms in ancient Greek, "delphos." Its link to fertility, birth, feminine sexuality and the natural force of women was acknowledged also by the Celts, as well as pagan cultures throughout northern Europe. Eleanor Gaddon traces a "Cult of the Fish Mother" as far back as the hunting and fishing people of the Danube River Basin in the sixth millennium B.C.E. Over fifty shrines have been found throughout the region which depict a fishlike deity, a female creature who "incorporates aspects of an egg, a fish and a woman which could have been a primeval creator or a mythical ancestress..." The "Great Goddess" was portrayed elsewhere with pendulous breasts, accentuated buttocks and a conspicuous vaginal orifice, the upright "vesica piscis" which Christians later adopted and rotated 90-degrees to serve as their symbol.

Along with the fish used as a code sign for early Christian communities, the ichthys also found its way into the ritual and decor of church rites. One case in point is the church mitre worn by prelates. Where did this originate? Dr. Thomas Inman discussed this phenomenon in his two volume opus, "Ancient Faiths Embodied in Ancient Names," (1869). He included a representation of **a sculpture from Mesopotamia, observing "It is the impression of an ancient gem, and represents a man clothed with a fish, the head being the mitre; priests thus clothed, often bearing in their hand the mystic bag..."**

"In almost every instance," added Inman, "it will be recognized that the fish's head is represented as of the same form as the modern bishop's mitre."

The fish also appears in another sacred iconograph, the Avatars of Vishnu, where the deity "is represented as emerging from the mouth of a fish, and being a fish himself; the legend being that he was to be the Saviour of the world in a deluge which was to follow..."

http://www.godlessgeeks.com/LINKS/fish_symbol.htm

So, like our tradition of eggs at Easter – named for Oestre, Goddess of Dawn – our fish calls forth the Great Mother and the power of fertility and

new life. And when the bishop dons his mitre, he is “putting on the fish.” How cool is that?

Some of you already know that I have trouble with some Christian symbolism – in particular, the cross. Even though we Protestants feature an empty cross (representing the resurrection) as opposed to the Catholic crucifix (focusing on the crucifixion) – it still feels like we are lifting up the symbol of torture and death. My theology is deeply dependent on the LIFE of Jesus – what he did and taught – not how he was murdered by the Roman Empire.

So perhaps the FISH is the answer. As we at Mt. Hollywood focus on transformation and new life, a new way of being in the world, we might find different symbols to represent our work and way of being. I nominate the fish as our “less than secret” code, a way to lift up new life, fertility and creativity. Those of us who find it humorous might put the fish symbol in our car window – the one with Darwin written inside. ☺ We might create a new logo – new banners – use it with a twist as part of our branding as we create PSA’s.

And I encourage you to explore symbols and their meaning – or create symbols of your own and share those with this community.

The visual is worth 1000 bites of sound.

Go fish power!!!



Scripture Reading January 25, 2015 – Epiphany 3

Mark 1:14-20

14 Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, 15 and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

16 As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea--for they were fishermen. 17 And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." 18 And immediately they left their nets and followed him.

19 As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. 20 Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

Fish are mentioned and given symbolic meaning several times in the Gospels. Several of Jesus' twelve Apostles were fishermen. He commissions them with the words "I will make you fishers of men".

Having resurrected, Jesus is offered some broiled fish and honeycomb in Luke 24:41-43.

At the feeding of the five thousand, a boy is brought to Jesus with "five small loaves and two fish". The question is asked, "But what are they, among so many?" Jesus multiplies the loaves and fish to feed the multitude. In Matthew 13:47-50, the Parable of Drawing in the Net, Jesus compares God's decision on who will go to heaven or to hell ("the fiery furnace") at the end of this world to fishers sorting out their catch, keeping the good fish and throwing the bad fish away. In John 21:11, it is related that the disciples fished all night but caught nothing. Jesus instructed them to cast the nets on the other side of the boat, and they drew in 153 fish. In Matthew 17:24-27, upon being asked if his Teacher pays the temple (or two-drachma) tax, Simon Peter answers yes. Christ tells Peter to go to the water and cast a line, saying that a coin sufficient for both of them will be found in the fish's mouth. Peter does this and finds the coin.

The fish is also used by Jesus to describe "the Sign of Jonah". (Matthew 12:38-45) This is symbolic of the resurrection of Christ upon which the entire Christian faith is based. (1 Corinthians 15:1-58)

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ichthys>

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/5082676/Swimming-fish-could-be-key-to-generating-electricity-for-UK-homes.html>

Children's Time

Prayer
Pastor Dan