

Animals of the Bible (13) The Fish



In mid-March last year, soon after the first lockdown began, I wrote the first of what has turned into a weekly series of meditations. A few weeks later I wrote of how some of the disciples met with the risen Lord Jesus on the Galilean lakeside after He directed them to throw their net out again after an unsuccessful night's fishing. When they tried to draw the net back in they could not, because it was so full. They towed it to the shore, and when Simon Peter dragged it up the beach they found they had caught a hundred and fifty-three large fish.

What was the significance of this number? Many ingenious suggestions have been made down through the centuries. The simplest is that given by St Jerome. He said that in the sea there were one hundred and fifty-three known kinds of fishes, and the catch therefore included every kind. So the number symbolizes the fact that one day all people of all nations will be gathered together to Jesus Christ. In St John's Gospel chapter 21 we read that although there were so many fish, the net did not tear. The net can be understood to represent the Church. God's love is for all people, regardless of nationality, ethnicity or language, so the Church, too, must be big enough to hold them all.

Some of Jesus' disciples were, of course, fishermen by trade. Some of His miracles involved fish, and He made use of fishing boats both as a means of transport and as a pulpit (Mark 3: 9). It is hardly surprising, therefore, that one of the early symbols used by Christians was the Sign of the Fish. It was some time later that the Cross became the predominant symbol of the Christian Faith; after all, in the early years of the Church crosses were still being used as cruel instruments of execution. The Greek word for "fish", *ICHTHUS* (in Greek letters *ΙΧΘΥΣ*) also made up the initial letters of the words *Iesous CHristos THEou Uios Soter*, meaning "Jesus Christ, God's Son, Saviour". So here was a secret sign which also summed up the heart of Christian belief and served as a simple aid to help explain it.

After just over twelve months writing these meditations, I feel that now is the appropriate time for me to bring them to an end. To everyone who has read all or some of them, thank you. I hope you have found them helpful during this difficult year. I wish to record my special thanks to Pete Wildman for making them available through the Wirral Circuit website, and for the vivid and fitting illustrations, including some of his own photographs, which he has found to accompany and enhance them. God bless you all.

A Prayer:

No more we doubt thee,
glorious Prince of life;
life is naught without thee:
aid us in our strife;
make us more than conquerors
through thy deathless love;
bring us safe through Jordan
to thy home above:

Thine be the glory,
risen, conquering Son,
endless is the victory
thou o'er death hast won. AMEN

(Singing the Faith 313, Edmond Budry, 1854 – 1932, translated by Richard Birch Hoyle, 1875 – 1939)

- Rev John Barnett

Image: Christian ICHTHUS symbol.