

The Meaning of the 153 Fish Caught in Peter's Net (John 21:1-18)

April 23, 2013

This is the Fourth Week of the Easter Season this year. Last Sunday, we heard the gospel passage from John 21:1-18, in which Jesus cooks breakfast for a group of his disciples shortly after his Resurrection. So it seems appropriate to reflect this week on that mysterious number—153—the number of fish which Peter caught in his net after he obeyed the Lord's instruction to cast his net once again.

That there were exactly 153 fish caught in Peter's net during the Lord's post-Resurrection appearance at the Sea of Galilee (Jn. 21:1-18) has puzzled commentators since at least the time of Jerome. Why 153? The note on Jn. 21:11 in the *Anchor Bible* indicates that the early commentators took the number to be symbolic of some aspect of the Church or its mission. Jerome, for example, thought that there were exactly 153 species of fish and thus that the catch represented the Church's universal mission. Many other writers saw the number as a composite. Augustine recognized it as the sum of the integers from 1 to 17 but found nothing meaningful in that observation. Another found it to be the area of an equilateral triangle of 17 units per side, representing the "fullness" of the Church since numerologically, both 10 and 7 are numbers of completion. And Cyril of Alexandria understood the number as the sum of 100 + 50 + 3 and attached arbitrary meanings to the first two numbers.

None of these explanations satisfies. All are arcane and gratuitous. Surely the gospel writer, if he were constructing a symbolic number, would select a number with a Christian significance detectable by the gospel's audience.

I suggest that the number 153 can be interpreted in a precise way as a representation of the post-Resurrection Kingdom—the fulfillment of Jesus' mission to establish a "seedling" community of justice, peace, and self-giving love, according to the Divine Plan for Unity in Creation (see Eph. 1:8-10).

The story of Jesus' appearance at the lake shore has several layers of meaning. It clearly says that the risen Jesus is always with his *agape* community, guiding the faithful and nourishing them with the Sacred Meal. It is also the story of the commissioning of Peter as leader of the early Christian community, clearly in vv. 15-17 ("Feed my sheep"), but also – perhaps significantly – in v. 11, where it is Peter hauling the net full of fish ashore.

In addition, this appearance episode has an evangelization theme. It is this theme which the number 153 enhances. Fishing, of course, is an easily recognized metaphor in the gospels for evangelization (e.g., Lk. 5:10: "From now on you will be catching men.") In the present story,

Jesus directs the cast of the net that results in the haul of fish. The promise is that Jesus will guide the growth of the Church into a universal community of *agape* love, despite the inability of humans to bring this about by their own efforts.

Like the dragnet of Matthew's gospel (Mt. 13:47), the net here in John 21 represents the Kingdom—the spreading *agape* community in the age after Jesus' Resurrection. This post-Resurrection community, as Jesus repeatedly assures his disciples in his Last Supper discourse (e.g., Jn. 14:13, 15:8-9, 15:26, 16:27, 17:6, 17:21m 17:23 and 17:26) is the union of God and the believers. This union is represented clearly in the number of fish in the net. The number 153 is the sum of two squares: 144 and 9. These are the squares of 12 and 3 respectively, and they represent the whole constituency of the universal *agape* community. The number 144 is 12 perfected (that is, squared) and represents all of the elect believers—the perfected “12 tribes” of the Chosen People. And the number 9 is the Three of the Triune God in its perfect (squared) form.

So the catch of 153 fish represents the entire *agape* community after the Resurrection: the union of the universe of believers with the perfectly loving and faithful God.

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CITATION

Raymond E. Brown, S.S., trans. *The Gospel According to John (XIII-XXI)*. Anchor Bible 29A. New York: Doubleday, 1970.

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