

One to One with Jesus.

JESUS' BIG CATCH: SIMON PETER

Luke 5v1-11.

A personal encounter with Jesus is a life changing experience. In this series we will be using Luke's Gospel (ESV) to take a look at some people who had one-to-ones with Jesus and what happened as a result. We will start with one of the twelve disciples, Simon, better known as Peter.

v1: On one occasion, while the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he was standing by the lake of Gennesaret. This is the Sea of Galilee. Jesus was in a setting he loved and where the people were. Yes, he visited the temple courts when in Jerusalem and spoke in the synagogues of Galilee, but he loved to be out and about among ordinary people. And already, early in his ministry, there are hordes of people crowding in to see and hear him.

He saw two boats by the lake, but the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. To set the scene I need to get across how important fishing was in this place. This wasn't a pastime for a few families - it was the most lucrative industry in Galilee. Men like Zebedee (the father of James and John) who owned a fishing business were important figures in the community. Many other outfits would have been fishing the waters in competition. This was big business. Fish was an important food. It was part of the staple diet of every family in the land.

The fishermen... were washing their nets. These were *dragnets* which were thrown from the boat during an expedition; they had floats and weights attached so that they moved vertically through the water bringing the fish to the shallow waters where they were gathered. Nets like this were valuable and had to be taken good care of. Mending and washing nets was a sure sign that the men's work was over and done for that day.

v3: Getting into one of the boats, which was Simon's, he asked him to put out a little from the land. A bit cheeky you might think. But Simon already knew Jesus. In ch.4v38 we read of Jesus in Simon's home healing his mother in law of a fever. We have the impression that this home was Jesus' base in Capernaum. And there is an earlier incident in John's Gospel which records Simon's first meeting with Jesus after being introduced by his brother, Andrew. (John 1v40-42)

He asked him to put out a little from the land. Jesus asked a favour of Simon, but the request was not contrived. He needed Simon's skill. It would take some expertise to handle a boat for the purpose Jesus had in mind. It needed an experienced man like Simon. And Jesus *was asking a lot* of him. Simon had been hard at work all night and he was very tired; he just wanted to sign off! And all the nets had been

cleaned and washed, for goodness sake! But Jesus was just starting *His* fishing expedition - and *Peter* was the catch he had in mind.

v3: And he (Jesus) sat down and taught the people from the boat. And, of course, Simon had to listen as he controlled the boat. **v4: And when he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.”** Jesus, the carpenter, was giving advice to Simon, the experienced Galilean fisherman. But that’s not all. He was demonstrating His “ignorance” to these men.

First, anyone who fished the Sea of Galilee knew that you had to fish when it was dark; that was when the fish came out. During daylight hours they hid under rocks; the fish could see the nets in daylight! Second, an amateur might think you should fish in the middle of the lake but Simon knew that fish in this lake were much more plentiful around the streams and springs at the edge where there was oxygen rich fresh water

At this point we also need to remember that the Sea of Galilee is large – 13 miles long and 8 miles wide. Who did this Jesus think He was? It would seem that before Jesus does something extraordinary he doesn’t pander to our intellect or experience.

v5: And Simon answered, “Master, (the word is *epistates* – boss or chief) **we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets.”** This sounds very submissive but Kenneth Bailey suggests *not* in his paraphrase of Simon’s words: *“Listen, Teacher! My boys and I are professionals. We know where the fish feed – it’s along the shore and the best time to catch them is at night. That’s why we were out on the lake all last night. We’re not stupid! We have just worked the fishing areas and caught nothing. We are now dead tired, and I have stayed awake a few more hours – to serve you. You rabbis think you know everything and now you order me to fish during the day in deep water. Very well! Let’s go out and we’ll see who knows what about fishing!”*

Whatever he felt he did as Jesus asked. So off they went, experienced fishermen directed by the carpenter from Nazareth, and they threw their recently washed nets overboard – knowing that they would need mending and cleaning *again!*

v6: And when they had done this, they enclosed a large number of fish, and their nets were breaking. Suddenly it was action stations. They had hit a massive shoal of fish. The nets had always been adequate but they were beginning to tear.

Simon had hit the jackpot! A large catch meant bumper sales and big bonus.

v7: They signalled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. Notice how Simon *signalled* but didn’t shout; he wouldn’t want their rivals to know about this prolific new area of the lake.

And they came and filled both the boats. This was an abnormally large catch. Neither the nets nor their boats were designed for this many fish. But there is a

comical edge to the story telling here. One minute Simon is sceptical then he is overjoyed – and then everything takes a turn for the worst. **They began to sink.** Not only is his magnificent catch going to be lost but the boat as well! In the light of this the next statement is all the more remarkable.

v8: But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.” Why did he react like this? He could have responded in so many different ways: laughing; whooping; expressing admiration. But instead **he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.”** In the company of Jesus, Peter was suddenly and acutely aware of his sinful condition. It reminds us of the reaction of young Isaiah when he was confronted with a vision of the glory of God. *“Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips... for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”* (Isaiah 6v1-5) So why did Peter react like this in the presence of Jesus?

Maybe it was because Simon had a glimpse of Jesus' glory.

It was a natural reaction to a supernatural sign. The text goes on: **v9: For he and all who were with him were astonished at the catch of fish that they had taken, and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon.** As an experienced fisherman Peter knew that this was not beginner's luck ; this had been no accident . It was an awe inspiring miracle and it had given him a glimpse of Jesus' glory. Simon no longer called Jesus *“Boss”* but *“Lord” (kyrios)*, a word often used for God Himself. When you truly encounter Jesus as Lord, it takes you beyond a casual way of relating to Him.

Or was it because he had come face to face with authentic holiness?

Kenneth Bailey suggests Peter reacted like this because he found himself face to face with a person who challenged his life and his priorities at the deepest level. Like everyone else Simon's energies were directed towards making as much as he could – and this large catch was the stuff of his dreams. Yet this Jesus was so very different. He had the power to do things which could make him rich quick – including healing the sick. But His focus was elsewhere – the kingdom of God. Peter had never met anyone quite like this. He had come face to face with authentic holiness. So he says: **“Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.”** Simon didn't want to defile Jesus by close contact with himself. That was the thinking of the day. But Jesus had come to make the unclean *clean* by coming into contact with Him. Jesus still does that today.

v10: And Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid; Maybe Simon was traumatised and wondering what would happen next - *this man Jesus was capable of anything!* **“Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men.”** i.e. Simon, your skills as a fisherman are still needed, but with a different catch in view. *Just as Jesus had caught Simon, so Simon would catch others.*

When Luke wrote this he even made a subtle point in the word he chose for “*catching*”. (Remember this conversation would have been in Aramaic and Luke is writing in Greek.) He used the word *zogreo* which means “*to catch alive*” or “*catch for life*”. Fish are a dead catch, but men and women are *made alive* by being caught by Jesus!

The miracle was a sign to Peter. It pointed beyond itself to Peter’s new life and different priorities. Instead of his life being taken up with his own domestic concerns and small ambitions Jesus was giving him a new job description. There would be years of training with mishaps and failures along the way. But Jesus had a big mission in mind for Simon. Go and make disciples of all nations. On the day of Pentecost he stood and proclaimed the gospel to a vast crowd of international pilgrims to Jerusalem; three thousand of them believed and were baptised. *That was the kind of fishing Jesus had in mind for Simon.*

But this incident wasn’t just a sign for Simon Peter. Through the centuries many people have been “caught” by Jesus. He ‘caught me when I was eighteen. He catches us for the same purpose, so that we can play our part in finding others.

We are here in Northumberland for a big catch, in other words, we are longing to see many people come to faith in Jesus in the county. All the cultural indicators tell me this is unlikely – that people are turned off by church, that this is a secular society, that we have all the resources of the powerful 21st century multi-media deployed against us. Yet in a perverse way this can encourage us. Jesus turned common sense on its head when he gave instructions to Simon. In the same way, almost every great advance of the gospel in the last two thousand years has been in adverse conditions – often in times of the harshest persecution.

The great missionary pioneer James Hudson Taylor, said: “*There are three stages in the work of God: Impossible; Difficult; Done.*” This has given me the title for our series of Bible Studies in ‘Acts’ (over five Wednesday evenings in Morpeth) looking at Paul’s first century mission in the mighty Roman Empire.

v11: And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him. They would not have left the fish to rot – but Luke makes the point that, rather than enjoy the big bonus their catch would bring, they followed Jesus. Jesus had shown Simon and his partners that if He had wanted to *He could easily be the most successful fishing magnate Galilee had ever seen.* But Jesus was about something more important than making money. So these fishermen left behind the greatest catch of fish of their lives. Jesus had caught *them* instead! He has “*landed*” Simon and his colleagues. Has he landed you? If so, don’t be surprised if you want to land others – you will be so full of Jesus you will be telling others about Him.

John Wilthew. January 2010

Acknowledgement: In preparing this message I found Kenneth Bailey’s: ‘Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes’ (IVP Academic. 2008) particularly helpful.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

First read Luke 5v1-10.

1. *Without* summarising Sunday's message – what do group members recall of the significance of the details in this story just by looking at it again? (*Discussion leader, read the text again allowing the group to comment as you go through; have my message notes to hand.*)
2. John began by referring to Aled Jones' Sunday morning Radio2 interview with Rosemary Conley (the fitness lady!) She became a Christian after reading a book ('Power for Living') in which some well known personalities wrote about their life changing encounter with Jesus. Were you affected by someone else's experience when you became a Christian? Tell the group about it.
3. Jesus seemed to be testing Simon's trust by his instructions about fishing again. Can you think of any instances where God seems to have sent you off on some enterprise which didn't make any sense – only realising later why He had done it?
4. Why do you think Simon's reaction to the miracle of the big catch was 'Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.'?"
5. What did Jesus mean about "catching men"? (*Give space for the inevitable jokes here!*) Are there any clues in this incident which might have helped Simon, the fisherman, to see how he might "fish for men" in the future?
6. Pray together now about having a "big catch" in your locality, and in Northumberland in general – starting this year.