

A Net Full of Fish, a Life Turned Inside Out (Luke 5:1-11)

Intro

I want to start with a confession: I find relating to people difficult. I've never been a natural people person. In primary school I basically didn't talk to anyone until Grade 4. And even after that, relating to people never came particularly naturally to me.

Even now, I can spend far too much time and energy wondering whether I have understood someone properly. Did I read that conversation rightly? Did I come across the way I meant to? What did they mean when they said that? I find people wonderful. But I also find relating to people mentally and emotionally demanding. That's why I studied engineering. Machines are much easier than people.

And becoming a Christian didn't suddenly make that disappear. But following Jesus has forced me to see something that, if I'm honest, I would rather avoid: people matter enormously to God. People are not interruptions around the edges of the important things in life. And that is uncomfortable, because people cost us something. They take time. They complicate our plans. They disappoint us. They require a kind of sacrifice from us.

So, if you're like me, there is a very natural temptation to arrange life around the things we can manage, to stay with what is familiar, predictable, comfortable.

And I wonder whether we can do something similar with Jesus. For those of us who have known him for some time, the danger is probably not that we suddenly stop believing in him. We trust him. We love him. We gladly hear his word. We are thankful for his grace.

But Jesus becomes familiar. We get used to having him around. And almost without noticing, we can begin to assume that we already know what having Jesus in our lives means. We know roughly where he fits. We know roughly what he will ask of us. We know the shape of the life we are going to live.

That is why Simon is so interesting. At the beginning of Luke 5, Simon goes from comfortable to very *uncomfortable* to being a changed person. By the time those boats come back to shore, Simon will never see Jesus, or himself, or what his life is for, in quite the same way again.

So Luke takes us down to the lake...

1. Jesus steps into Simon's ordinary life

Luke 5:1–3

We're not going to dive right into the lake. We're just going to dip our toe in the water because that's what Luke does, and that's where Jesus is, on the edge of the lake, as he steps into Simon's ordinary life vs1-3

5 As the crowd was pressing in on Jesus to hear God's word, he was standing by Lake Gennesaret. ²He saw two boats at the edge of the lake; the fishermen had left them and were washing their nets. ³He got into one of the boats, which belonged to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from the land. Then he sat down and was teaching the crowds from the boat.

So there is Jesus standing beside the Lake, the crowd presses in on him, to hear **"God's word"**. But in order for more people to effectively hear the word of God, Jesus gets into one of the boats—Simon's boat—and asks him to put out a little from the shore. He sits down and begins teaching the crowds from the boat.

Now, at this point, Simon is wonderfully cooperative with Jesus. Jesus needs a boat, asks for his boat and Simon obliges him to use his boat. Simon is quite happy to have Jesus around. And now, by

lending his boat, Simon is even helping other people hear the word of God. Jesus has stepped into Simon's ordinary world. His workplace. His boat. His equipment. **Simon says "No problem."**

Now I think a lot of us here today, are similar. We're glad to have him around, overjoyed that Jesus has a real place in our lives. But Luke is about to take us further into the lake. Where we'll discover there is a difference between being glad to have Jesus around, making room for Jesus in our life, and seeing Jesus' word take command of our life, seeing Jesus become the organising centre of our lives. We'll come back to that.

Jesus finishes speaking, and Simon might have expected that to be cut / end scene. "Jesus then left that region and moved onto the next town..." But no, in verse 4, when the public teaching stops, Jesus turns to Simon. Now in this moment, Simon didn't necessarily anticipate that he would become the focal point of Jesus' action. **Simon says "Who, me?"** But, see Vs4

2. Jesus' word begins ruling Simon's life

Luke 5:4-7

⁴When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into deep water and let down your nets for a catch."

⁵"Master," Simon replied, "we've worked hard all night long and caught nothing."

Now, Simon and his crew haven't just dropped a line in the water for a couple of hours and given up. They have been busting their gut net trawling all night. Fishing was their core business, their livelihood. This was a serious commercial operation: boats, nets, hard work.

And night was normally the better time to fish. That was when fish were more likely to come into shallower water and were less likely to detect the nets. This was no flighty fishing affair. It's a serious business.

Simon says, "Hey, Jesus, We have already done this properly, and we've caught nothing. And now the night is over, the nets are being washed, and we're knocking off. Jesus, its pull-up stumps, pack up and go. Its home time, Jesus."

Remember, Simon is the expert fisherman here. Jesus is not. Simon knows the lake. He's in his element. This is Simon's work. His livelihood. His expertise. His turf. Have you ever rocked up to a job sight and tried to tell a tradie how conduct his business. You wouldn't dare, would you.

Simon knows his trade. And everything in his experience and expertise says: **The fishing is done.** And Jesus says: **Go out again.**

Jesus is pressing right into the area where Simon is most competent and giving him a command that cuts directly across his settled judgment about what makes sense.

Jesus has spoken, and the question for Simon is: does Jesus' word carry sufficient weight with him, even when it seems to defy his own best judgment. Listen to the second half of his answer:

we've worked hard all night long and caught nothing. **But if you say so,** I'll let down the nets.

More literally "on your word, I will let down the nets" and that is the turning point.

Now, what do you think, did Simon have a good reason to trust Jesus in that moment? In one sense no. He might have said to himself "what does Jesus know about fishing, this is my thing", on the other hand, in the previous chapter, every word Jesus has spoken has held enormous power. And so he says

“Well, Jesus, We worked all night. We caught nothing. **But on your word...we’ll do it**”

Now that sentence tells us something about what it means to follow Jesus. See, it is easy enough to listen to Jesus while words basically align with our judgments and interests. But his words become far more challenging when they begin to contest our own settled judgments.

We’re talking about times when Jesus says something we don’t like, maybe about the necessity of forgiving that person who’s just a pain in your backside, or how you use your money, or what we do with things like sex, or ambition. We’re talking about when our instinct is to say, “I’m not sure that works for me, Jesus.” When what Jesus has to say clashes with our worldview, when it runs against the grain of our experience, that’s when things get real. How will you respond in those moments? *How* you respond tells you something about your relationship with Jesus.

Well, you’ve got to love Simon? Perhaps Jesus healing his mother-in-law has already primed him. We don’t know. He says “I’m not sure about this Jesus, but on your word...”

If you have kids, wouldn’t you love it if your kids responded to you like this. “Dad, I’m not so sure about this, I don’t know if that works, but on your word, I’ll kiss the ground that you walk on.” (I don’t treat my kids like this)

So Simon and his crew let down the nets.

And vs6 When they did this, they caught a great number of fish, and their nets began to tear.

Luke doesn’t muck around with the narration of the miracle here. Jesus has spoken. And the fish turn up. So vs7

⁷So they signalled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them; they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink.

The scene is almost comical in this radical turnaround. After a whole night of experienced fisherman, during prime fishing time...nothing...One word from Jesus and suddenly there are mountains of fish are piling up, nets are breaking, multiple boats are filling, and now they begin to sink. This is not lucky-guess Jesus. This is unmistakable-display-of-power-Jesus. It’s the power of Jesus’ word over the creation. This is the kind of power that true humanity exercises over creation. My words don’t have this power, but Jesus’ words do.

Now, Luke has already been preparing us to expect the power of Jesus’ words. So it’s no surprise to us as readers. Clint highlighted something of Jesus authority last week. Again and again, Jesus word determines reality and drives the events of life. Again and again, Jesus word overrules any threatening force that stands against him.

A demonic spirit cries out against him (4:33). Jesus rebuked him and the demon came out (vs35)

A fever threatens the life of Simon’s mother in law, and Jesus rebuked the fever (vs39) and it left her.

Then in vs41 we read of a whole army of demons “coming out of many” shouting at him, “But he rebuked them and wouldn’t allow them to speak” And they were silenced.

There is something unique about the arrival of the Son of God in the world that stirs the hornets nest, the demons are agitated and spring out of every crevice and cave. There’s a uniqueness to the demonic activity in the gospels that means we don’t expect the same frenetic demonic activity today. That’s not to deny what Clint said last week about real demonic activity. We don’t need to become secessionists. But neither are we continuations. We don’t expect the same scale and intensity we

read about in the gospels. In fact the intensity during those three years of Jesus ministry is unique in the whole Bible.

But the bigger point here is the triumph of the word of God. And you'll see this theme all the way through Luke-Acts where the word of God determines reality, conquers rival powers and inaugurates God's kingdom.

And now Simon is beginning to discover that the power of Jesus' word reaches into his own world as well. Into the place where Simon has experience. Into the place where Simon knows what he is doing. Into the place where Simon might reasonably have thought, "This is my turf. My territory, the place I control." Jesus speaks into *that* place. And the lake answers him. The fish answer *to* him: he's the Lord of creation.

But Luke does not linger over the fish. He does not tell us how much they were worth. Whatever happened to those boat loads of fish? Where did they go? Was there some kind of fish taco party in Capernaum that night at the lake? We don't know. There is no time given for us to celebrate the catch. "And Peter took a selfie and sent it to all his friends." No, there's no time to enjoy the success.

If you had just hauled in the catch of your life, what would you say? "Jesus, can we do this again tomorrow? You need to come fishing with us more often?" Wouldn't you tell all your friends? "Hey guys, we've got ourselves the fish-magnet man. He's like Magneto for fish!" At the very least, you might expect excitement, gratitude or smiles. But there's a more basic reaction here that shows us that sometimes we miss the bigger point.

Because, of course, the fish are not the point. The power of Jesus' word has shown Simon something, and I don't think it's not what we would expect.

3. Jesus overturns Simon's view of himself

Luke 5:8–10a

Verse 8: "When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, 'Go away from me, because I'm a sinful man, Lord!'"

That is strange. Notice Luke's wording: "**When Simon Peter saw this...**" Somehow, in seeing what Jesus has just done, Simon has begun to see **Jesus** differently, and has begun to see himself differently.

Seeing Jesus differently

Back in verse 5 he called him "Master." That is already a respectful title. Simon knows Jesus is someone with authority. But now, "I'm a sinful man, **Lord**." That's a significant recognition in Luke's gospel. We, the readers, have been told who Jesus is from the beginning:

1. The angel said he would be called the Son of the Most High.
2. At the Jordan river, the voice from heaven called him God's beloved Son.
3. In the synagogue at Nazareth Jesus announced that the Spirit of the Lord was upon him.
4. We have watched demons recognise his authority.
5. We have watched sickness obey his command.

And now Simon has seen Jesus' word rule over the fish of the sea, in the place where he has control. Simon has caught a glimpse of an authority and greatness of Jesus. But to be up close and personal with that kind of greatness, leaves him terrified.

Seeing himself differently

And what is surprising is the way Simon suddenly now sees **himself**. He now sees himself exposed and vulnerable. “I’m a sinful man.” That a surprising response to a miraculous catch of fish. Jesus has not said anything about Simon’s sins. And yet, confronted with Jesus, Simon becomes acutely aware that something is wrong with him.

This not the only time we see this pattern in the Bible. Isaiah sees the Lord in the temple, high and exalted, and cries out: “Woe is me for I am ruined because I am a man of unclean lips.” Isaiah says this before he himself is commissioned by God. When confronted with the overwhelming reality of God’s holiness, our consciousness is gripped by our utter unworthiness. That is what happens to Simon. Has that happened for you?

A few moments ago his problem was no fish. Now, for him, the abundance of fish around him, that doesn’t even matter. His problem *now* is that **Jesus is in his boat**. And Simon knows enough about himself to know that this is way to close for comfort. This is dangerously close to mind-blowing power. So he says, vs8

“Go away from me, because I’m a sinful man, Lord!”

Knowing who I am, how can I bare to be so close to someone like you, Jesus.

Earlier, Simon was perfectly comfortable having Jesus in his boat. But now, he can’t bare to be in his presence.

I think we often assume that the more we understand Jesus, the better we will feel about ourselves. And of course there is real truth in that, there *is* enormous comfort in knowing Jesus.

But there is another effect as well. The clearer Jesus becomes, the harder it is to relate to him casually. His authority exposes how flimsy and foolish we are for insisting on our own autonomy. His goodness exposes the compromises in our lives, the things we have learned to tolerate or excuse. His holiness exposes ways we’ve been resisting the claim of his word over our lives.

Why does Simon respond like this? Luke tells us:

“For he and all those with him were amazed at the catch of fish they had taken, and so were James and John, Zebedee’s sons, who were Simon’s partners.”

They are astonished. The word of Jesus has broken their normal categories of comprehension; his word has dismantled their normal controls over operations. This is no longer simply an impressive teacher borrowing a fishing boat. The catch of fish has overwhelmed them because the catch has revealed something about the one who commanded it.

And suddenly Simon’s confidence has been overturned. His expertise no longer looks so impressive. The things that dominated his ambitions, that drove him to strive for, are now relativised by the one before him. And he feels like he’s up the creek even while he’s out on the lake. Simon’s boat has suddenly become an uncomfortable place to be. Because the man sitting before him has exploded his normal expectations.

And I wonder whether that is one of the dangers of becoming familiar with Jesus. You can genuinely know a great deal about Jesus. You can genuinely hear his word regularly, be grateful for him, you can be genuinely happy for Jesus to have a place in your life. But there are moments when his word presses closer, and we begin to realise that the Jesus we have welcomed is far less manageable than we imagined him to be.

Now, don't mishear me, I'm not proposing the kind of Christianity that mopes around feeling sorry for ourselves, woe is me I'm such a terrible person. But is it possible you have slipped into a casual relationship with Jesus, and unintentionally undermined his Lordship.

Jesus is not merely wise, kind, compassionate, and merely one important part of a well-ordered life. Simon is beginning to discover Jesus' uncompromising **Lordship**. Jesus has *stepped* into his life, but now Jesus no longer *fits* comfortably in his life anymore. His sense that Jesus can simply be accommodated within the ordinary arrangements of his life has collapsed. Jesus doesn't belong! How can a man like Simon possibly remain this close to someone like Jesus?

Simon's answer is "Go away from me. There's no future for a man like me in the presence of one like you." Now, given the power of Jesus' word and the rightness of Peter's response, we might expect to read "And Jesus, seeing that Simon had made a fair point, returned to shore, thanked Simon for the use of his boat, and went off to find a more suitable disciple."

But Jesus gives him a very different and surprising answer. He refuses to leave at Simon's request.

4. Jesus claims Simon's life

Luke 5:10b–11

Don't be afraid

Instead Jesus says: "Don't be afraid." Jesus does not correct Simon's confession. He does not say, "Simon, you're being too hard on yourself. You're actually a pretty good guy." No. Jesus knows the darkness that lurks in each of us. There is something entirely right about Simon's instinct to be terrified as a sinful man, up close and personal with the holy Lord of creation.

And yet Jesus says: "Don't be afraid." Rather than departing, Jesus deals with Simon's fear by keeping him close. That's the first half.

From now on...

Then Jesus says: "From now on you will be catching people." There is a future for someone like Simon with someone like Jesus. Jesus reassures him, but he does not leave him where he is. He gives him a new future.

Catching people

Simon has spent his working life catching fish. Now Jesus says: "From now on you will be catching people." The word Luke uses has the sense of catching alive. Simon's life is now going to be caught up in Jesus' work of gathering people alive for the kingdom of God. From now on, that is what his future is about.

And Simon has not applied for this job. He has not put up a LinkedIn profile: "Experienced fisherman seeking exciting new opportunities." In fact, Simon has just discovered how inadequate he is. He is on his knees saying, "I'm a sinful man." He has nothing impressive to offer the man who can command the fish. And yet Jesus draws him into his own purpose.

I think Christians can easily imagine that we will become useful to Jesus' mission once we have reached some particular level of maturity. When we are confident enough. Competent enough. Know the Bible well enough. Brave enough to speak. Have our lives organised enough. But that is not how Simon's future begins. It begins with a sinner on his knees recognising that he is unworthy, and hearing Jesus say: "Don't be afraid. From now on..."

Simon's call: unique, but not isolated

Now Jesus is speaking specifically to Simon here, and Simon will have a unique place among Jesus' apostles. We are not called to be apostles. But Simon is not so unique that this passage has nothing to say about ordinary Christian discipleship.

As Luke continues, Jesus' mission keeps widening.

1. In Luke 9, Jesus sends the Twelve to proclaim the kingdom.
2. In Luke 10, he sends a much larger group.
3. Then, in Acts 8, when persecution scatters the Christians from Jerusalem, Luke tells us: "Those who were scattered went on their way preaching the word." Not merely the apostles. Ordinary scattered Christians are speaking about Jesus.
4. And in Acts 11, unnamed believers carry the message as far as Antioch, speak about the Lord Jesus, and a large number believe.

So Simon has a particular apostolic calling. But participation in Jesus' people-gathering mission is not just for apostles, missionaries or unusually keen Christians. It belongs to ordinary Christian discipleship. And that can begin very simply. Learn the name of a non-Christian neighbour and get to know them. Invite a workmate over for dinner. Pray regularly for two friends who do not know Jesus. Ask someone what they think about Jesus. Invite them to church. Read one of the Gospels with someone who is interested. Invite them to Christianity Explored. Look for one person you can help take one step towards Jesus.

But following Jesus will cost us something. It cost these first disciples something too. Look at verse 11: "Then they brought the boats to land, left everything, and followed him." Jesus has spoken directly to Simon. But now Luke says **they** left everything and followed him. James and John have seen enough. It is almost as though they suddenly realise they do not want to miss whatever Jesus is doing next. They bring the boats in. They leave everything. They follow him.

Luke narrates it almost as though it were the most natural thing in the world. But think about what they are leaving. They have just caught more fish than they have probably ever seen in one haul. This is the commercial success they had been working for all night. And now they walk away from it. By verse 11, the enormous catch that dominated the scene only moments earlier has become strangely unimportant. "They left everything and followed him." Simon's old life contained plenty of good things. Work. Income. Family. Possessions. Responsibilities. There is nothing wrong with those things. But once Jesus says, "**From now on...**", they can no longer determine what Simon's life is ultimately for. Simon leaves behind the right to determine the purpose of his own life because Jesus has given him another one.

And the same is true when Jesus calls us to follow him. That does not mean every Christian must leave paid employment. Luke will show us faithful disciples who remain in homes, raise families and work ordinary jobs. It does not mean Christianity requires every disciple to give away every possession. But I suspect most of us are not in great danger of doing that. Our danger is almost the opposite. We are very happy for Jesus to have a genuine place in our lives. We gather to hear his word. We pray to him. We sing his praises. We want our children to know him. We are thankful for his grace. Like Simon, we may gladly let Jesus step into our metaphorical boat. But will Jesus' word— "**From now on...**" command my whole life? Christians do not have two lives: one life where we serve Jesus, and another where we get on with work, family, money, friendships, leisure and everything else. We have **one life, under one Lord**. And if the Lord who owns my life is gathering people to himself, then his concern for people must become mine as well. That does not make every Christian an apostle. It

does not mean every Christian has the same gifts. It does not mean every conversation has to become an evangelistic presentation. But it does mean that the people around me who do not know Jesus cannot simply remain part of the scenery of my life. They are people Jesus loves. People for whom Christ died. People who need to hear the good news of forgiveness in his name. And therefore people I am called to notice. To know. To love. To pray for. To speak to. To invite. To serve. That is what it means for his purpose to become ours.

And Luke will show us just how remarkable that can be. Because Simon himself will not turn out to be an impressive disciple. His confession here “I’m a sinful man” will prove painfully true in ways Simon does not yet understand. He will misunderstand Jesus. He will make promises he cannot keep: “Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.” And on the night Jesus is arrested, Simon Peter, the man who left everything to follow Jesus, will deny three times that he even knows him.

And still Jesus does not abandon him. He goes to the cross to rescue him from his sin. That is ultimately how a sinful man like Simon can remain close to the holy Lord. Jesus gives himself. He dies. He rises. And forgiveness is proclaimed in his name.

Then, by the time we arrive in Acts 2, this same Peter stands up in Jerusalem—the sinful man, the failed disciple, the man Jesus refused to send away and proclaims the crucified and risen Jesus. Thousands respond. The fisherman who began beside the lake captured by Jesus’ word becomes a man through whom that word goes out and catches others. The word Simon first heard beside the lake now goes out through Simon to gather others to Jesus.

And that is how God’s word has reached us. Other disciples have gone before us. They have prayed. They have spoken. They have crossed rooms and streets and countries. They have opened Bibles. They have invited. They have taken risks. And by God’s grace, the word has reached our ears. Jesus does not merely forgive us so that we can return to the life we had already planned, now reassured that God is on our side. His grace gives us a new future.

And that is the word Jesus speaks to us too. “Don’t be afraid.” You do not need to become impressive enough for Jesus to use you. Simon never did. Jesus keeps this sinful, failing man close, and ultimately gives his own life to make that possible. But the Lord who says, “Don’t be afraid,” also says: “From now on...” We have one life, under one Lord. And if the Lord who owns our lives is gathering people to himself, then the people around us who do not know Jesus cannot simply remain part of the scenery. Who can you move towards? Who can you pray for? Who can you speak to? Who might you help take one step towards Jesus? And what might you need to leave behind— what comfort, what time, what privacy, what competing priority— so that Jesus’ concern for people genuinely becomes yours? Not because you are trying to prove yourself. The Lord who says, “Don’t be afraid,” also says, “From now on...” Jesus’ grace does not simply return Simon to the life he had already planned. It gives him a new future. You might, like me, find relating to people difficult, challenging, mentally taxing, emotionally draining. But Jesus comes to us in his grace: “Don’t be afraid. From now on you will be catching people.”