

# **Jesus and the Amazing Catch of Fish**

Fishing can be a frustrating business. You sit all day beside the pool without a bite, and just when it is going home time, you see your neighbour's rod bent double as he hauls in fish after fish from the same patch of water.

Peter and Andrew knew the feeling. Their angling was more than a hobby – they fished for a living. An empty boat for them meant nothing to sell on Tiberias market; no money to take home to their wives. They had had many a night like that before – hours of toil, damp and dripping nets, and nothing to show for it. It was all a matter of chance – the weather, the food available to the fish, or where they happened to be. You just had to shrug your shoulders and carry on.

Unfortunately, for net men like Peter and his brother, even after a fruitless trip, you still had to tidy up before you could go home for a rest. The fine cord meshes had to be cleared of weed and washed free from mud, or they would dry hard and stiff in the sun. The two disciples were sorting wearily over their heaps of netting at the water's



edge, when the shadow of Jesus fell over them.

It was Peter's boat that had caught Jesus' eye. The crowds were following thick behind, and he needed more space to teach. Climbing aboard, he asked Peter to pull out a little from the land.

From his floating pulpit, Jesus could be seen and heard by all, and nobody could thronk him. As the sun climbed into the sky, the disciples waited politely until he began to round off his remarks. Perhaps they could now slip away for a bite and a cool beaker of wine. But Jesus had other ideas.

*When he had stopped speaking, he said to Simon, "Launch out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch" (Luke 5:4).*

## **An Amateur Fisherman?**

It was embarrassing. Did he not realise they had caught nothing all night? There was no point in going out again, and the nets were clean – if they dropped them into the water, they would have to wash them all over again. As a carpenter, he could hardly be expected to know the lake like they did. Though they did not like to offend him, Peter's reply had a hint of condescension:

*Master, we have toiled all night and caught nothing; nevertheless at your word I will let down the net (v5).*

Once more they toiled away from the shore, and then stopped, with Jesus watching. With the grace and precision of the expert they shot the huge 'basket' net, weighted with small stones and ringed with cord, until it ballooned out over the water, and sank slowly beneath the ripples.

At once an excited Peter knew from the pull on the ring that they were on to something really big. The whole net heaved with the frenzied churning of hundreds of slippery, silver bodies. They had trapped an entire shoal. It was going to be a record. He could feel the meshes strain and snap under the enormous load, good fish escaping back into the sea.

Desperately he beckoned to his partners, out of earshot, but standing by the second boat, to come out to help them. With the combined efforts of the four men, they managed to haul the

catch over the gunwales, first of one boat, and then the other, clawing out the flapping fish until the twin heaps threatened to submerge the boats under their very weight.

It was the catch of a lifetime. Peter could calculate quickly how much it would be worth at the market. He could see debts repaid, replacement fishing gear, presents for the family, even surplus funds to invest.

Then, suddenly, he remembered Jesus, sitting quietly in the boat a few feet away from him. Jesus, who had directed the catch. Jesus, who evidently knew more about fish than he, the professional, had learnt in years. Jesus, the great prophet who had come from God. He had marvelled before at the miracles of healing in Galilee, but this sign touched his own heart.

*When Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!" ... And Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid. From now on you will catch men" (v8, 10).*

## **Lessons from the Catch**

There is much to be learnt from this incident. First, it sounds highly authentic. It would be difficult to suppose Luke would have invented something that was so obviously the catalyst or trigger for Peter becoming a full time disciple. Peter's reactions to Jesus, both before and after the letting down of the net, are typical of human nature and true to the impulsive character he afterwards reveals.

Secondly, there comes a similar turning point in the life of every disciple, a moment of realisation when the call of Jesus of Nazareth suddenly



becomes not just an invitation to accept or ignore if we please, but the voice of the Son of God himself, with all his power, bidding us share in his everlasting Kingdom. In that moment of decision, all the rewards of this life, attractive as they seemed only a short while before, can be left behind as we follow him in the way.

And then, thirdly, there is something deeper still, a meaning to this story revealed by Jesus' words to Peter. Peter the fisherman was to become Peter the apostle. From plucking silver fish out of the dark waters of Galilee, he was to travel instead the sea of mankind, spreading the gospel net to bring in disciples for the Kingdom of God. Often in that weary task it would seem the waters were barren and empty, and spirits would sink low. But the eyes of Jesus see deep into the hearts of men and women. The unlike-liest material, by human judgement, may have the greatest potential for his Kingdom. It is a point the scriptures consistently make.

## The Sequel

It is not always realised that there was a sequel to Peter's fishing expedition. Two years later, he and the other apostles came back to Galilee. Jesus had been crucified, dashing their hopes of his role as the King of Israel. Then he had come back to life, appearing to them in Jerusalem. At his special request, they had travelled north to a rendezvous in Galilee. Here he was to appear to them, and probably to many others, for Paul records that subsequent to the Jerusalem appearances, over 500 people saw Jesus at once (1 Corinthians 15:6).

It seems to be while they were waiting for this appointment that Peter



decided to go fishing. They were back at the lakeside; the boats and nets, neglected through the busy years of discipleship, were still there, and they had nothing for breakfast. Once more he set out on the familiar routine, lamps flickering in the darkness as they shot the nets time after time into the black water. Once more, the night dragged by and they caught nothing.

However, in the pink light of dawn, they heard a shout from shore, and saw a man looking towards them. He greeted them kindly:

*Children, have you any food? (John 21:5).*

Perhaps he wanted to buy his breakfast, they thought, as they replied that they had not. But the stranger advised them:

*Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some (v6).*

Could he see something from the shore that they could not from the boat? Obliging, they cast again and, once more, Peter felt the familiar tug of a huge shoal enclosed in the bulging meshes. His heart leaped with excitement. But it was John, more thoughtful or with better sight, who realised that history was repeating itself. *"It is the Lord!"* he cried.

Without hesitation, Peter jumped over the side and began to wade to the shore, leaving his friends to tow the bulging net to land, for it was too heavy for them to transfer the catch into the boat. Peter himself took over the last stretch, dragging the precious bundles safely up the beach. The strange thing was the size of the fish. Instead of a mixture, they were all large. They counted them. Laid out side by side on the shingle, there were 153. And despite the strain and the dragging up the beach, the net had not broken. Not one had escaped.



## **A Significant Second Sign**

John's careful and methodical reporting suggests we are meant to think deeply about this last great miracle of Jesus, and perhaps to contrast it with the earlier catch, when Jesus was with them in the boat. It is one of only eight miracles or 'signs' that John records in full.

There are obvious points of difference: the first time the net broke, but the second time it stayed intact. On the first occasion the catch was huge but normal; a mixture of good and bad, large and small. The second catch was less heavy, for Peter could drag the net alone to land, but it was all large fish, precisely numbered. The apostles

fished the same lake, but the second time the quality of the catch was much more important than the sheer quantity.

There is something comforting about the second catch. The gospel net, at its first casting, encloses all kinds of disciples, some good, some bad; some who will endure to the end, and some who will return to the world from which they were called.

The second catch seems to portray the day when Jesus, having gone away for a while, comes back at the break of a 'new day' to judge the world and set up God's Kingdom. And there, on the right side of the boat (the place of honoured guests at a feast) the nets will be found to have enclosed a catch of chosen men and women, all safely numbered and not one of them lost.

Peter and his fellow fishermen responded to Jesus' call and became faithful disciples, living in the love of God and doing His will. They needed time to fully appreciate what Jesus was teaching them and what was required, just as we do. Like them, we can appreciate the power and truth of Jesus' message.

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