

## **LUKE 5.1-11: A CALL TO PASTORS TO LAUNCH OUT INTO THE DEEP**

Preached by Paul Beasley-Murray at Ministry Today UK Consultation: 9 March 2016

Whenever we read Scripture, we read within a particular context, through a particular lens. The context or lens today is a Ministry Today consultation for pastors on ‘recalibrating church’.

### **1. THE CALL OF A PASTOR IS TO WIN PEOPLE FOR JESUS**

The NRSV entitles this passage ‘Jesus calls the first disciples’. Yet although Andrew, James and John end up following Jesus, the call is to Peter. So when Jesus says “put out into the deep, the underlying Greek verb (*epanagage*) is in the singular and directed to Peter alone; whereas the command to “let down your nets for a catch” is in the plural and directed to the crew manning the nets (v5).

Notice that Jesus calls Peter in the first place to fish: “From now on you will be catching people” (v10). The Greek word (*zograein*) means ‘to capture alive’. In other words, says my Greek Lexicon, Jesus wanted Peter to “win men for God’s Kingdom”, and by implication men and women who will extend God’s kingdom. James Edwards makes the interesting comment: “What Peter will do in his service for Jesus will cause life to flourish” - this reminds me of the words of Jesus, “I have come that they might have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10.10).

As leaders in God’s church, we like Peter are called to ‘catch people’. Every pastor is a missionary pastor. The task of pastoral care goes hand in hand with evangelism. Yet all too often we distinguish between pastors and evangelists. We say, for instance, that an evangelist is a pastor without manners. But Paul said to Timothy, a young pastor: “do the work of evangelist, carry out your ministry fully” (2 Tim 4.5). Unless we are engaged in evangelism we are not fully discharging the ministry to which God has called us.

### **2. JESUS OFFERS US A MODEL**

Jesus too was in the fishing business. He too was an evangelist. He came proclaiming ‘good news’ – or what Luke calls “the word of God” (v1). This phrase “the word of God” appears 20 times in Luke’s Gospel and always refers to the proclamation of the Gospel. What’s more, Jesus was being very successful as an evangelist, for “the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God” (5.1). .

It was then that Jesus had a bright idea: “he saw two boats” (v2). James Edwards comments: “The (in)sight of Jesus opens a constricted situation to new horizons and possibilities”. As a result Jesus took a creative initiative. He commandeered Peter’s boat and began to preach from ‘a floating pulpit’. As one writer put it: “Jesus is fishing from the boat to catch men” (Brun). Jesus provides us with a role-model: we too are called to be innovative when it comes to our proclaiming the good news.

### **3. LIKE PETER, WE HAVE WORKED HARD WITH LITTLE RESULT**

Have you ever had the experience of people eager to hear you preach (see v1)? There were times in my ministry when the church was packed for specials such as Christmas and Easter, or for a baptismal service. But people ‘pushing and shoving’ to hear God’s Word? Not really. By and large our churches are not full of people desperate to hear God’s word. Church attendances are going down. There are growing churches, thank God, but overall the picture is a gloomy one.

Like Peter and his friends, we have been fishing, with little result: “Master, we have worked all night, but have not caught anything” (v5). The Greek word (*kopiasantes*) means to “toil, strive, struggle”. “We were hard at work all night” (REB); Peterson: “we’ve been fishing hard all night”. How true that is of us! Evangelism is hard work today. I have a NZ friend who claims that almost every Sunday when he preaches people come to faith. Would that were my experience. The other year I preached on the lost sheep, and 19 people came forward to receive Christ – but that was in China. Evangelism in England is becoming harder, and we are catching fewer and fewer people for Christ. To quote Mark Ireland & Mike Booker: “The loss of knowledge of the Christian story and the slipping out of our shared life of Christian practices mean that those who begin the journey of faith have further to go before they become fully integrated church members. Or, perhaps to put things in a more positive and hopeful way, those who begin the journey of discipleship following Jesus Christ will find it harder and take longer to end up as enthusiastic members of traditional churches” (*Making New Disciples* 8).

#### **4. JESUS ENCOURAGES US TO BE ADVENTUROUS**

Jesus said to Peter: “Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch” (v4). I remember a time when we were on holiday in North Wales. As I was walking along the beach, I saw a group of men who had just landed an enormous catch after having been out to sea in a boat. My children that afternoon had been out fishing with some cheap fishing nets, but had caught nothing, for they had stayed on the seashore. It is as if Jesus is saying: ‘Don’t just stand there at the water’s edge tickling minnows, be adventurous - do some serious fishing’. Peter did what he was told, and “they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break” (v6).

Jesus calls us to be adventurous – to do church differently; or in the words of Steve Chalke, to ‘recalibrate’. This challenge reminds me of a Rotary video I saw recently. Now if you think that churches are in difficulty, Rotary clubs are in even more difficulty. The average age of a Rotarian in the UK is 73. Rotary has to change radically if it is to survive. This was the point of the video. The speaker began with a quotation from Charles Darwin: “It is not the strongest species that survives, nor the most intelligent, but those most responsive to change”. He argued that if Rotary is to survive, then it must remain relevant – and to remain relevant, Rotarians must *re-calibrate* their purpose, *re-engineer* how they do things, and *re-position* themselves in the market-place. As churches, we too need to recalibrate, re-engineer and re-position ourselves if we are to be responsive to the challenge of change. Otherwise we will not survive. Remember the seven last words of a church: ‘We never did it that way before’.

#### **5. JESUS ENCOURAGES US TO CHANGE**

Bob Jackson wrote “Churches making changes grow and those that don’t shrink” (*What*

*makes churches grow?*<sup>183</sup>). In a 2013 survey of Anglican churches in south-west Wales, of the 92 churches who had made no change, attendance was down by 9%; of the 67 churches that had made at least one change, attendance was up 16%. Even more significant was the impact of change upon children: where there was no change, there was a 20% loss of children; where change took place, there was a 60% increase in children.

Precisely how we should change, will vary from place to place. I am not convinced that Fresh Expressions or Messy Church is the panacea. Nor am I convinced that Steve Chalke has all the answers. I am convinced, however, that we have to change, and that the change begins with us as leaders. Change is not in option in church life. We either change or we die. In the words of the North American mega-church pastor, Leith Anderson, "There is a basic principle of church growth: 'For a church to grow, it must want to grow and be willing to pay the price'. The price is least counted in dollars. It comes in the more costly currency of change. It is doing church in new ways, incorporating new people, moving out of comfort zones, and existing for others rather than for self."

Change takes courage – it takes faith. But Jesus said, and still says: “put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch”.

## **6. JESUS PROMISES A GOOD CATCH**

What precisely is it that Jesus is saying to you? What changes do you need to take if you are to be effective in proclaiming the Good News? I don't know. But what I do know is that when we are adventurous, when we are prepared to change tack, then Jesus promises a good catch. This was the experience of Peter and his colleagues. When they launched out into the deep, “they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break” (v6).