**The Miracles of Christ (Week 8)**

**The Miraculous Catches of Fish**

Today we are going to look at the two events whereby Jesus causes the disciples to catch overflowing amounts of fish after nights of no success. Both take place on the sea of Galilee and bookmark the beginning of His ministry and the end, in His final act after His resurrection.

They tell us much about His love and His role as man and God. Each miracle is recorded in only one of the gospels; Luke tells of the first, and John the second.

Both tell us much about the disciples and therefore about ourselves.

**The Early Ministry**

The first catch is recorded in the gospel of Luke, in 5: 1-11

*So it was, as the multitude pressed about Him to hear the word of God, that He stood by the Lake of Gennesaret, 2and saw two boats standing by the lake; but the fishermen had gone from them and were washing their nets. 3Then He got into one of the boats, which was Simon’s, and asked him to put out a little from the land. And He sat down and taught the multitudes from the boat.*

*4When He had stopped speaking, He said to Simon, “Launch out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.”*

*5But Simon answered and said to Him, “Master, we have toiled all night and caught nothing; nevertheless at Your word I will let down the net.” 6And when they had done this, they caught a great number of fish, and their net was breaking. 7So they signalled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink. 8When Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!”*

*9For he and all who were with him were astonished at the catch of fish which they had taken; 10and so also were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. And Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid. From now on you will catch men.” 11So when they had brought their boats to land, they forsook all and followed Him.*

The chronology that we see in Luke’s telling of this miracle is somewhat confusing, as it is recorded after Jesus cured Simon’s mother-in-law. Matthew Henry interprets the miracle as being the same occurrence noted by Matthew and Mark regarding the calling of the first disciples. The common element is that they would become fishers of men, and, “they forsook all and followed Him.”

Mark 1: 17-18 states:

*Then Jesus said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men.” They immediately left their nets and followed Him.*

Matthew 4:19-20

*Then He said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fishers of men.” They immediately left their nets and followed Him.*

Elizabeth Johnson believes the preaching from the boat occurred after the initial meeting with the four disciples when they had already made the decision to follow Christ.

“In Luke’s Gospel, this is not Simon’s first encounter with Jesus. Jesus has already been to Simon’s home in Capernaum and has healed his mother-in-law (4:38-39). Perhaps that explains Simon’s willingness to let Jesus use his fishing boat as a floating pulpit.”

(Elizabeth Johnson: Distinguished Professor Emerita of Theology at Fordham University).

Spurgeon makes no comment on the relationship between the accounts of Luke, Matthew and Mark, but focuses on the details of the miracle.

No matter, the lesson we learn from the miracle are the same regardless of the order of events.

We note firstly how the crowd pressed upon Jesus, suggesting he could not talk to them in those circumstances. We know how difficult it is to address people when the speaker is under severe pressure. Perhaps think of journalists crowding around some news-worthy person as they leave their homes in the morning. It is both intimidating and unconstructive.

So Jesus looked around and saw two boats and thought to use one as a pulpit. He asked Simon to pull out a short way from the land and then sat down and taught the crowd.

Jesus did not build a fine Church before starting His ministry, or use His skill as a carpenter to construct a platform from which to preach, but used the world in which He lived to deliver His wisdom. Henry concludes Jesus sacrificed the ability of the crowd to hear him for being seen better. Is it not a fact that sound travels better across still water than solid ground, so His choice of the boat may well have achieved both better hearing and visability.

When he had finished speaking He turned to Simon Peter and instructed Him to launch out into the deep. Clearly Simon had been listening to Jesus talk, and had initially followed the request to cast out a little way without query. This supports the argument that these events were after the meeting recorded in Matthew and Mark, supposing that Jesus was known to Simon and had already agreed to follow Him.

But Simon tells Christ that they had fished all night without success. “Nevertheless at Your word I will let down the net.” We can imagine that Simon was tired having fished all night and relaunched his boat for Jesus. He clearly felt letting down the nets in the deep was a futile exercise, one that was likely to irritate him under his weariness. But, here we see the great faith of Peter, which shows us what true belief entails. His words are the founding example of Christian belief; “Nevertheless, at Your word I will…”

At the time Simon would not have understood the significance of his reply to Jesus. But later we see that John starts his gospel with the pronouncement, ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

Perhaps in this passage we have a glimpse of why Jesus took the four fishermen as his first disciples. They would have battled tempestuous seas, but stuck to their task day after day, and night after night. Even though tired or exhausted, they willingly obeyed. And they also worked as teams, profiting together in success or suffering in failure. And failure had not deterred them from picking themselves up and continuing to apply their resolve. In the modern world we see many who lack these characteristics, preferring to have everything given on a plate, rather than working for their success. But we also see some who follow the example of the disciples.

Having let down their net in obedience we next see their reward.

*They caught a great number of fish, and their net was breaking.*

Following the Word unhesitatingly grants us great rewards, perhaps not always immediately, as in this case, but certainly at the correct time.

The miracle shows Christ’s dominion over the natural world. Psalm 8 shows David’s understanding of this as we read, especially in this morning’s context, about the fish that pass through the paths of the seas.

Verses 6-9

*You have made him to have dominion over the works of Your hands;
You have put all things under his feet,
7All sheep and oxen—
Even the beasts of the field,
8The birds of the air,
And the fish of the sea
That pass through the paths of the seas.*

*9O Lord, our Lord,
How excellent is Your name in all the earth!*

The catch of fish was so colossal that Simon and Andrew had to call to their partners, James and John, to help them get the fish to land. The sense that the volume of fish was too great for the two boats emphasises the overflowing nature of God’s love for His faithful people.

Luke 6:38 comes to mind when we imagine the fish overflowing the boats.

*Give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom. For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you.*

When Simon saw what had happened he fell down at Christ’s knees and said: , “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!

Simon’s action on seeing the extent of the catch is understandable for us all. Being in the very presence of God should cause us to realise how sinful we really are. We don’t want God to see our true selves; we may be only too aware of our hypocritical natures and feel very uncomfortable. However, God knows our hearts, which is what he looks at, thus trying to conceal weaknesses is fruitless. Asking God to depart from us will change nothing. It is up to us to flee from sin, as we heard on Sunday a week ago.

Spurgeon refers to holy shrinking when considering Peter’s reaction:

Not knowing what he said, though he knew what he meant; feeling as if he, so sinful, had come too close to the Lord who was so gracious, so he must not dare to keep near to him. Have you never felt the same as that? If not, methinks you have neither known your Lord, not yet yourselves for the knowledge of Christ, combined with the knowledge of ourselves, is sure to produce this holy shrinking, in which we have no need for anyone to say to us, “Put off thy shoes from off thy feet,” for we are almost ready to put off our very body, for we can scarcely bear the glory of the presence of the Lord.

But the Lord Jesus does not depart from Simon and the others. He immediately comforts them with his words. “Do not be afraid.”

Knowing that we are sinners and knowing that He is God should give us the comfort that we have nothing to fear when he showers us with his gifts. His ultimate and timeless gift of the Holy Spirit will enable us to work through the times of hardship and lack. But we need not be afraid in His presence. He has taken our sins on his shoulders, enabling us to go boldly to the throne of grace. (Hebrews 4:16).

As we have seen before in these studies on the Miracles of Christ, we see Simon behaving as we would also behave, enabling Christ to teach us about ourselves, as he taught the disciples about themselves.

Should we find ourselves in a boat with Christ, I pray our words to Him would be a little different from Simon’s, “Come closer to me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.”

Having told the fishermen not to be afraid, Jesus now says, “From know on you will catch men.”

Although the new disciples probably understood what Jesus was saying to them, as they were themselves witnesses to Christ’s teachings, and had seen the multitudes that had begun to gather to hear Him, they would only discover the significance of their responsibility in catching men, much later on. Here Christ’s words, “do not be afraid”, convey the truth that they will be severely persecuted in their discipleship, but will have Him with them as their great saviour as they obey His final command to them.

JC Ryle explains that the disciples would “find their own hearts weak and frail, like the hearts of any of their hearers. They be often tempted to give up in despair, and to leave off preaching.

Let us pray daily for all ministers that they may be true successors of Peter and his brethren, that they may preach the same full and free gospel which they preached.”

In verse 11 we see the further obedience of the disciples.

*So when they had brought their boats to land, they forsook all and followed Him.*

The events of the day, after a sleepless night, remember, opened the eyes of these four and they forsook all and followed Jesus. They stood by Him for the full extent of His ministry and beyond. And they followed His final command: *“Go into the all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.”* (Mark 16:15).

This miracle clearly shows Christ’s great compassion for those faithful to Him. He had compassion on the crowd and preached to them. He showed great love for His disciples by rewarding them for their faith and obedience, and for supporting them with His words, “do not be afraid.”

The greatness of God is seen in producing plenty where there had been nothing to show for mans’ night time efforts. This done not with any fanfare but with the simple words, “let down your net.”

**Christ on the Shore after the Resurestion**

The second occurrence of an abundant catch of fish is found in John’s gospel 21: 4-13 and takes place after Jesus is raised from the dead.

*Simon Peter said to them, “I am going fishing.”*

*They said to him, “We are going with you also.” They went out and immediately got into the boat, and that night they caught nothing.*

*4But when the morning had now come, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. 5Then Jesus said to them, “Children, have you any food?”*

*They answered Him, “No.”*

*6And He said to them, “Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some.” So they cast, and now they were not able to draw it in because of the multitude of fish.*

*7Therefore that disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” Now when Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment (for he had removed it), and plunged into the sea. 8But the other disciples came in the little boat (for they were not far from land, but about two hundred cubits), dragging the net with fish. 9Then, as soon as they had come to land, they saw a fire of coals there, and fish laid on it, and bread. 10Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish which you have just caught.”*

*11Simon Peter went up and dragged the net to land, full of large fish, one hundred and fifty-three; and although there were so many, the net was not broken. 12Jesus said to them, “Come and eat breakfast.” Yet none of the disciples dared ask Him, “Who are You?”—knowing that it was the Lord. 13Jesus then came and took the bread and gave it to them, and likewise the fish.*

*14This is now the third time Jesus showed Himself to His disciples after He was raised from the dead.*

This miracle has much in common with the previous one. The disciples had fished all night and had caught nothing. Simon Peter plays an important part in the events. Christ tell them to cast their net. And they catch more fish than they can handle.

Chapter 20 of John ends with the disciples in Jerusalem where Christ had shown himself to them after his resurrection. The fact that they had gone to Galilee was probably as a response to Christ’s statement at the mount of olives found in Mark 14:28. “But after I have been raised, I will go before you to Galilee.” Similarly He tells the two Marys to tell the disciples to meet him in Galilee. (Mark 16:7 and Matthew 28:10).

 Once they have gone there, Christ appears to the seven disciples mentioned. But whist waiting for Jesus, Peter tells them that he is going fishing. Peter’s impatience has possibly come to the surface again. The other 6 decide to go with him, perhaps to escape the grief which must have encompassed them all, or perhaps to search for food.

But they toiled all night and caught nothing; a déjà vu for the two pairs of brothers in the first miracle explored today.

In the morning a man appeared to them on the shore and, referring to them as children, instructs them to cast the net on the right side. Clearly the man spoke with some authority as they obeyed and were rewarded by a huge catch of fish.

John was then the first to perceive that the man on the shore was in fact Jesus. Many commentators suggest that because Jesus had not been recognised up to that point, His appearance had been changed to reveal His glorious spirit and His dual position as God the Son. His role of man had been to take on the sins of the world and to die as a sacrificial lamb for us as sinners. This work had been completed, and it was likely His appearance has changed. In fact Mary thought He was a gardener, and the disciples on the road to Emmaus did not recognise Him until “He took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they knew Him.” (Luke 24 ; 30-31).

But John, being the one whom Jesus loved, saw Christ. Then Peter, again displaying lack of patience, put on his outer garment and plunged into the sea. The difference in these two remarkable disciples is worth some reflection. The two had very different personalities, yet both love Jesus to the extreme. Peter was the first to act, while John the first to see. Peter was commissioned to build Christ’s Church, John to see Christ’s revelation. And to write it down.

It take all sorts of believers to make up a successful church.

The remaining disciples left on the boat after Simon had jumped off, brought the vessel to the shore. Upon reaching land they perceived a fire of coals upon which was lain fish and bread.

There are other instances where we see fish and bread being brought together in the gospels. Specifically in the two miracles of feeding the 5000 and the 4000 which we looked at in week two of this series. Fishermen are key to Christ’s ministry, and Jesus is the bread of life. In the feeding of the multitudes we conjectured whether the fish represented the law and the profits (the old covenant) and the bread God’s Word (Jesus Christ, the new covenant). I leave it up to you to decide whether to seek any further clarity on the meaning of the two types of sustenance.

Once the boat had reached the shore, Peter took it upon himself to drag the net to land. One supposes that with 153 large fish in the net, (and possibly many smaller ones), Peter did not do this alone but supervised the landing. Just as he supervised the building of the Church, but did not do it alone. The important point is that despite the size of the catch the net did not break. In the first encounter with Jesus in the boat at the beginning of His ministry, the net was breaking. The fact that this time the net was unbroken possibly shows that the bond Jesus had with His disciples could not be broken, and He would be there to support them throughout their coming period of service, no matter how daunting that was to become. They would become fishers of men and the net that held them was unbreakable.

Matthew also makes reference to the kingdom of heaven being “like a dragnet that was cast into the sea and gathered some of every kind.” (Matthew 13:47).

For me the number 153 has no particular significance, but a curiosity mentioned by JC Ryle in his commentary refers to a writing of a Greek poet, Cilicia in which he states that “an account of the number of fishes known to him in his time, being exactly one hundred and fifty three.”

(I mention this for the curious among you, not as anything worth discerning in this study).

Then Jesus said to them, “Come and eat breakfast.” Yet none dared ask Him who are you? – knowing that it was the Lord.

Now all the disciples had been with Jesus for 3 years. Yet they dared not speak to Him. This does suggest that His appearance and his gravitas had changed overtly. There is a sense of the disciples being over-awed by His presence. Yet they had seen him twice before in the house in Jerusalem after His resurrection. Then Jesus speaks to them in a most reassuring and even mundane way. “Come and eat breakfast.” I trust we all will hear those words ourselves one day in heaven.

Then the Lord Jesus continuing in his life-long role of service, gives the disciples the bread and fish to eat.

This miracle, more than most, reveals Christ as God, who cares for his flock. Who is preparing the disciples for their work to come, which is for our benefit. He does not leave them unsupported or leaderless, and after breakfast He goes on to prepare Peter for his leadership role. “Follow Me,” He says to Peter. (v19).

Perhaps these two miracles will encourage us to follow, as did Simon Peter.

