

6 February 2022

Isaiah 6:1-8
1 Corinthians 15:1-11
Luke 5:1-11

The heavy door swung open and the flickering light of the fiery torches revealed two guards manhandling a young man into the cell, the prisoner unsteady on his feet, still reeling from the effects of a recent flogging – evident from the oozing wounds on his back. With a shove from the guards the prisoner was sent sprawling onto the floor of the cell. He landed in a heap near an older man who sat with his back against the stone wall. The door slammed shut and the key rattled in the lock.

The older prisoner shuffled closer to the newcomer, wincing as the stocks that trapped his legs and held them forcibly apart like a wishbone dragged along the floor. “Here, friend, have some water and bread”, he offered. “It will be a while before your family and friends are told you are here and need to be provided for.”

The food and water were taken gratefully, the young man almost gagging in his haste to consume them.

“What are you in for?” he asked, when at last able to speak.

“I am here because I have the misfortune to be one of those wrongly condemned to death for starting the fire that has laid waste to much of Rome. But with the misfortune also comes honour because the accusation arose merely because I am a follower of Jesus, whom we know is the Christ.”

“You are one of those Christians then!” exclaimed the young man. “I had heard something of your sect before I left my home town of Corinth. Our synagogue leaders have often spoken in opposition to this new Christian teaching, especially after a former leader, Crispus, had gone off to this blasphemous way.”¹

“He is not just ‘one of those Christians’”, remarked another of the prisoners. “Let me introduce Simon, better known among us as Peter because of the nickname that the

¹ Acts 18:1-8

Christ gave him. This Peter is one of our pre-eminent leaders, and a great messenger of the good news.”

“Well, Simon called Peter, I am Acher,” replied the newcomer. “What do you make of it all now, this good news of yours, now that you face execution? Wouldn’t it have been better to have given up on this futile mission? Perhaps even now it isn’t too late to recant.”

“I left my livelihood behind to follow Jesus in the service of the good news for the three years or so he was present among us. I have continued to give him my all since he disappeared from sight as he ascended to God the Father.”

Acher spluttered at this, but Peter went on oblivious to the implied objection: “Giving him my mortal life now, as seems to be what the situation at present demands, is simply faithfulness to his commissioning.”

“Tell the story again,” implored the third man. “Tell the story of how he called you from your nets. Peter was a fisherman, you know,” he explained to Acher.

“It must be quite a tale,” observed Acher. “What could compel you to leave your vocation – unless it was as forcible as these Romans dragging me off from my carpentry shop merely for hosting a gathering of zealous friends from Jerusalem? Tell me the tale, do!”

Peter shuffled himself back against the wall and began.

“It was by the Lake of Gennesaret (which you might also know as Galilee). My brother and I were fishermen, as Yadid here has mentioned. With our business companions we had fished the lake for many years, as had our fathers before us. This particular morning we had the boats already drawn up onto the shore and were well through the task of scrubbing our nets free of water-weed and rubbish: it had been a disappointing night’s work, for we had caught nothing. Close by, Jesus was at the water’s edge, with a mass of villagers pressing around him, trying to catch his every word as he taught the word of God.

“It was quite a clever idea, really. Jesus got into my boat and asked me to put out into the lake. You may think that it would have made it harder for the people to hear him, but in that part there is a little cove, shaped rather like a Roman amphitheatre.

It enabled Jesus to throw his voice so that it resounded over the people, and all could hear very well.

“I have to confess that I forget now the details of what he talked about. It is what happened next that I recall as vividly as if it were yesterday. When Jesus had finished saying what he wanted to say, he turned to me and told me to put out further, into the deep water, and to let down the nets. It seemed a ridiculous idea really: here he was, like you a carpenter by trade, telling me the fisherman how to go about fishing – and in broad daylight when the fish can evade the nets, and when we were tired and grumpy after an unsuccessful night’s toil!”

“It seems this Jesus has a way of meeting us in our disappointments and frustrations, in the midst of daily life and work; meeting us just where we are,” remarked Yadid. He cast his eyes around the gloomy cell. “Yes, even here.”

“So what did you do, Peter?” asked Acher eagerly.

“I did as he asked. Well, I was a bit reluctant and I did make a little complaint about the situation; but I went ahead and did exactly what he said. He wasn’t a complete stranger after all, and he had already delivered my mother-in-law from a fever. I guess I just somehow felt compelled to obey his command to me. I steered the boat out into the deep, and my crewmen and I let down the nets.”

“Here comes the best bit,” whispered Yadid with anticipation.

“We let out the nets, and almost immediately could feel the drag of a catch in them. We started to pull them in; but it was massive – a catch unlike any I’d seen before.”

Yadid laughed and clapped his hands, his shackles clanking in time. “The villagers enjoyed the results of that catch for weeks...”

“Hang on, Yadid, you’re getting ahead of me,” chided Peter. “We were pulling with all our might, but the nets were starting to tear. I yelled out for help from our partners James and John at their boat on the shore. They came as fast as they could, and between us we managed to get the nets pulled up before they broke apart. The two

boats were so full that we were in danger of sinking. We managed to steady the boats, getting the load distributed so that we wouldn't capsize, and carefully set out for shore. In the calm that followed it hit me: this was a miracle, a work of Almighty God. But if that was so, who was this standing before me, this agent of God's presence and power!? And then I was in mortal fear: who am I to stand before a holy presence? I am not worthy enough; I am not good enough! I was afraid: he had to go. I threw myself before him, and cried, 'Depart from me, Lord, because I am a sinful man.'"

"You sound like Isaiah when he had the vision of the Almighty in the temple," remarked Acher. "But what am I saying? Surely I would be wrong to equate the events!"

"Wait and see. Wait and see," said Yadid, quietly.

"Whatever you may think about whether the events can be equated," continued Peter calmly, "they had in common the remarkable fact that God in his grace chooses to work in and through people, even unlikely, undeserving, people like me, a humble fisherman; even people who might be thought of as outsiders, Acher."

Acher coughed, taken aback, for the name Acher means "the other one" or "outsider".

The three were silent for a moment, their thoughts interrupted only by the sound of moaning from an adjacent cell.

"So did Jesus leave as you demanded?" asked Acher, recovering himself.

"Far from it," continued Peter. "He told me 'Don't be afraid. From now on you will be catching people alive.'"

"From catching fish to catching people?" reflected Acher.

“Yes, but not like catching fish so that they die in order to be consumed. This is about catching people *alive* so that they can be given liberty and the life of the age to come! That was it. Again I just felt compelled to obey, to give up the fishing life I had known and relied upon and to follow him on this mission to bring people into liberty.”

“But surely Jesus had shown you the potential in your fishing business. Imagine the wealth you could have amassed now that he had shown you just the right spot. You gave all that up? And for what?” Acher shook his head in disbelief.

“Ah, but any money could in time run out, and in any event money certainly has no eternal value. The business Jesus had commissioned me for was and is of lasting significance,” replied Peter firmly.

“Well, it sure looks like it’s not going to last for you,” mused Acher. “It’s the death penalty for you, isn’t it, same as it was for your Jesus?”

“Yes. And that brings us exactly to the good news.”

“What? Good news? How so?” demanded Acher.

“It is a shame that you didn’t get to hear our brother Paul in your synagogue in Corinth. It is said that he is now in prison here in Rome too. Anyway, he has written eloquently to our brethren in your home town about this very matter. You see the good news lies in the fact that Jesus has been shown to be in the right all along. Yes, he was killed on a Roman cross, but that was the beginning of our liberation, because he took to the grave with him all the sin and evil and death of the world. On the third day he was raised from the dead, raised to renewed bodily life, and he appeared to me and the other brothers in Jerusalem, and then to many more in many different places. Paul was not one of us at that time, but he writes with enormous gratitude of the fact that the risen Jesus, our Lord, appeared also to him, the last of all such appearances. Jesus died and was raised to life, bring to fruition all that the scriptures we have in common point towards. Jesus was raised to life and so anticipates the age to come in which all the faithful will be raised to renewed

bodily life to live with him in the new creation God is bringing into being. My immediate future may lie in death out there in the courtyard; but my ultimate destiny is *life*, the life of the age to come. That is good news. And now this good news is being shared and received everywhere, to the very ends of the earth. That is what it means to catch people alive! That is what Jesus sent me to do.”

The cell door swung open, and an officer and several guards entered. Two of the guards released Peter’s legs from the stocks.

“Liberty?” inquired Acher quietly.

“Huh! The final release perhaps,” grunted the officer sarcastically. The burly guards hauled Peter to his feet, but he couldn’t walk so they dragged him towards the door.

“Acher,” said Peter urgently, a strange light shining in his eyes, as he strained to look back to where the young prisoner sat. “It is not too late for you too to enjoy true liberty. Talk to Yadid; he knows all about Jesus. In the months we have shared this cell he has finally become a fisherman too.”

The cell door banged shut; the key turned in the lock. Yadid wiped tears from his eyes, and turned to Acher. “What would you like to know about Jesus? He had been a carpenter too, you know.”

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