

Breakfast With Jesus

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[0 : 00] Peter and the other disciples had spent the whole night fishing.

They were very experienced fishermen, and I guess that a whole night's fishing without catching even a tadpole would have been very unusual indeed.

They knew where to fish, when to fish, and how to fish, and so for them to have labored all night, but to have caught nothing must have been, shall we say, very discouraging.

Perhaps over the course of the three years they had spent following Jesus, they had simply lost the knack of fishing, or maybe it was just the luck of the draw. I find it strangely coincidental that throughout the history of the church, there have been years and decades even where God's people have toiled all night fishing for the souls of men.

We've used the same techniques which were used before, and which will be used again, but for all our labor, we've let down our nets for a catch, and they're empty.

[1 : 16] Think of the thousands of hours that perhaps we've invested in mission with so few fish in our nets. There may be some of you for whom this is all you've ever experienced.

Nights of empty labor, exhaustion, and discouragement. As I was growing up, one of my mentors had been a missionary in a North African country for nearly 50 years.

And over the course of all these years, he had not even experienced one conversion to Christ.

Closer to home, I remember an old elder in a free church congregation, he's still alive, not too far away from our own congregation here, who had spent thousands of hours getting to know the people who lived near his church building, running youth clubs, inviting local people to evangelistic events.

But for all those thousands of hours of investment, he never saw any conversions to Christ.

Perhaps you feel at times rather like Peter and the other disciples felt that early morning.

Exhausted, discouraged. We're doing everything right. But to use a phrase from an earlier generation, there's just no goal in anything we're doing.

[2 : 37] We're doing all the right things at the right times and in the right places, but there are no fish in our nets, not even a tiny wriggling tadpole.

Now moving from one building to another building is not the silver bullet of mission. And I want at the very beginning to disabuse any of us of this notion. Moving from this magnificent building on St. Vincent Street to another building, who knows where in the city center, is not a cure-all or panacea. When asked recently if he would consider removing the pews from his church and replacing them with chairs, a very godly elder, who's my uncle, from a northern church replied, Well, that's fine then.

But instead of empty pews, all you'll have afterwards are empty chairs. Because if the fish aren't biting, then changing from a net to a line will make no difference whatsoever to your catch.

Moving location is not the silver bullet of mission and evangelism. You all know my home village in the north of Golsby is fairly downbeat. I'm pretty sure they don't supply fluoride in the water supply for our teeth, but Prozac in the water supply for our mines.

[3 : 58] From a young age, I believe the following truth. Expect nothing and you will not be disappointed. Expect nothing and you won't be disappointed. And so in this last sermon on our need for a new fishing boat, our last sermon on what is church, is it designed to lower expectations so that we won't be disappointed?

Am I reverting to my downbeat stereotype, my negativity and evangelistic barrenness? Is it inevitable that here or there, whatever, our chairs shall be empty and not even a tadpole, a polywog will wriggle in our nets?

Not at all. Not at all. In fact, this last sermon on the subject of our need for a new fishing boat and what we can expect to happen in our new church building turns away from the pessimistic, expect nothing and you will not be disappointed mindset to the realistic, attempt great things for God, expect great things from God mindset.

This sermon's desire to inspire us to see what happens when an evangelistic ministry has go in it. When the wind is behind us and the spirit is filling our sails.

These verses, they demonstrate what can happen when Jesus owns, empowers and blesses our mission as a church.

[5 : 31] Emptiness is replaced with fullness, barrenness by bounty and discouragement by delight. And all because the sovereign, risen Jesus is owning, empowering and blessing our mission as his people.

This is what we pray for more than anything else. Oh yeah, we're praying for a new fishing boat from which to fish for the souls of Glasgow's people.

But a good fishing boat with good fishing gear and a good crew of experienced fishermen doesn't mean anything if the fish aren't there. What we need to be praying for is that the sovereign, risen Jesus will empower, own and bless our mission.

So we come back to the beginning again. Peter and the other disciples had spent the whole night fishing but had caught nothing. But by the end of our passage, they're sitting round a charcoal fire with Jesus, enjoying the richest breakfast of fish and bread they had ever enjoyed and with 153 large fish in their nets to sell later on at market.

The question is, what had changed? What had changed? It would seem to me that three things had changed. First of all, the presence of Jesus.

[7 : 04] And then the power of Jesus. And then the provision of Jesus. And these are the things we're praying for. Whether we're here in our St. Vincent building, but more especially as we move into our new building, wherever that should be in downtown Glasgow, we pray for the presence of Jesus, the power of Jesus, and the provision of Jesus so that our mission shall result not in nets empty, but in nets full of Glasgow's men and women changed by the grace of Christ.

First of all then, what had changed? The presence of Jesus. The presence of Jesus. You will know that there are occasions after the resurrection of Jesus where Jesus seems not to have been recognized by his people.

Think of how Mary Magdalene mistook him for a gardener, and the two disciples on the way to Emmaus didn't recognize him. I rather think that this was not a psychological phenomenon, but that just like the risen Jesus was able to appear in locked rooms and to disappear and reappear at will, so he was able to keep his followers from recognizing him.

And this is such a case here in John chapter 21, where his disciples didn't know it was Jesus walking on the shore, calling out to them. But recognize him or not, his presence could not be hidden.

When Jesus is absent, the nets are empty. When Jesus is full, when Jesus is present rather, the nets are full. And that's the point, is it not?

[8 : 44] Recognize him or not, the presence of Jesus cannot be hidden. What made all the difference to the success of the disciples fishing was the presence of the risen Jesus.

Aye, even from a hundred yards distant, he on the shore and they on the boat. Afterward, when the disciples had landed their miraculous catch and they were eating breakfast with the Lord, they were there face to face with him, close enough to receive from his nail-marked hand freshly baked bread and fried fish.

Then he allowed himself to be recognized by them. Then they saw the Jesus they had spent all those years following and getting to know and love. But that is what had changed.

Whereas before they had set out by themselves to fish, now he was with them and all things had become new. Little words are very big words in the Bible.

Little words are very big words in the Bible. The word with is one of the smallest of them all, but its impact is far greater than its size. Remember the great promise of God to Joshua, who was making ready to cross the River Jordan into the promised land?

[10 : 03] Remember how that promise was framed? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened. Do not be dismayed. For the Lord your God is with you, wherever you go.

And as you read through the book of Joshua, you learn just what it means for God to be present with his people. Against seemingly impossible odds, they win battle after battle until finally, the land promised them by divine covenant is holy theirs.

And then think of how in that most famous Psalm of the Bible, Psalm 23, David's walking through the valley of the shadow of death. And it's a terrifying place. This valley of literally death's shadow. And yet even though he is surrounded on every side by the darkness, David is aware that God is with him and therefore can say, I will fear no evil.

Soon after, God has so transformed David's situation that he's now eating at a banqueting feast held in his honor. Such is the remarkable impact of the presence of God with his people.

[11 : 18] It turns them from cowards into conquerors and from being terrified into being triumphant. It transforms their nets from being empty to being full.

There's so much in this passage here in John 21, not the least of which is that the greatest delight of the disciples that day was not the 153 fish they'd caught, nor was it their full stomachs after that lovely breakfast on the beach.

It is that they were with Jesus. It was strong enough to force Peter to jump off the boat and wade to the shore. I wonder sometimes, did these 153 fish ever make it to market?

It wouldn't surprise me to learn that the disciples spent all morning on the beach, even after Jesus had left, talking with each other about what it had felt like to have him with them.

Perhaps at times in our desire for success, whatever that looks like, we overlook that the greatest privilege which can be afforded any Christian church is that for a special season, the risen Jesus blesses us with his closer presence.

[12 : 40] It's not as if he's not with us now. As his word is proclaimed and his praises are sounded, as his people gather together, prayer is offered and sacrament is administered, his spirit is with us.

But there are special seasons, are there not, when the spirit of Christ draws even closer? When our corporate gatherings as Christians are charged with the electricity of Christ's presence and he baptizes us afresh with his Holy Spirit.

This is success. More than the 153 fish, more than the full stomach that we know as a church with full assurance that he is with us.

That is what we pray for more than anything else in this world. The presence of Jesus. The second thing which had changed is the power of Jesus.

The power of Jesus. There's something eerily familiar about this miracle of the 153 fish. It should be familiar to us. In Luke chapter 5, verses 1 to 11, we looked at this passage a couple of weeks ago.

[13 : 58] At the very beginning of their discipleship, Jesus filled these men's nets. And now in John 21, it's as though Jesus is repeating the miracle as an exercise in recommitment to their discipleship.

Reminding them, as it were, of their initial dedication to him those three years prior. Be that as it may, think of the miracle itself.

These men were fishermen. These men knew their waters. They knew how to fish, when to fish, and where to fish.

They'd spent all night out on the water, but they hadn't even caught a tadpole. And again, it's not so much like the history, not just of our church, but of many, many, many churches.

We can go for months, years even, without any evidence of a spiritual work of God among us.

[15 : 06] We're working hard. We're praying hard. There's no real difference in the content or delivery of the proclamation of the word of God. There's no less effort being put into the various activities in which our church is engaging.

But for all that, we've let down our nets for a catch, and they've been empty. But then, in his sovereign grace, 153 fish swim into that net.

We're at the point of giving up, just like those disciples, but we feel compelled. Just give it one more go, and then, when we're at an end of ourselves, and we feel totally helpless, then it is that the power of God fills our nets.

Where they came from, we'll never know. Why they came here, we'll never know. All we can say is that it was entirely due to the sovereign power of God at work in his gospel.

And when I say power, I'm not talking gimmick. I'm talking power. I genuinely believe that the most powerful event to happen in our world today is when a sinner is brought to see his or her need of a savior, and when by faith they are saved.

[16 : 29] The most powerful miracle in the world today is that of regeneration and conversion. For it is only God who can open blind eyes and hearts closed to gospel truth.

That is real power. The power of kingdom growth. Real power is not when churches grow in number because of their setting. Because in our context, most churches, let's face it, grow at the expense of other churches.

Transferred growth or sheep stealing isn't really God's power at work at all. God's power is only really seen in the miracle of regeneration and conversion.

That is genuine kingdom growth. And that is what we are so desperately craving in prayer. That the power of the living Christ by his Holy Spirit will join with us on our new fishing boat as we let down our nets for a catch.

Without his power, we might toil all night. We might let down our nets again and again and again and catch nothing and become frustrated and become exhausted.

[17 : 48] Over the course of many months and many years even, we may continue to let down our nets. Nothing shall change. And then, when we're at an end of ourselves and at his perfect time, by his sovereign grace, the living Christ shall come in the power of his Holy Spirit for a season.

Men and women who have sat for many years under the ministry of the gospel but have been unmoved will in an instant be changed. Blind eyes will be opened and deadened hearts will live. Our children who for many years have treated the church as somewhat of a joke or a play thing will begin to take the gospel very seriously indeed. Our evangelism will have goal in it and people shall be saved.

Every time we'll let down our nets for a catch, we'll have to have help to draw back in all those who are being saved. And so we'll divide new strategies and we'll do our work but all the time we'll pray for the gracious hand of our God to be upon us because without him our nets will forever be empty. And yet I say that although I've placed the power of Jesus second, I maintain that his power always comes second to his presence. That it's his presence even more than his power we seek for where Jesus is there is his power.

[19 : 25] His spirit is his power. And so again, yes, of course, we pray for the power of Jesus but not without his presence. His presence must always come first.

Always. It's his presence which is the panacea. He may for his own sovereign purpose withhold the power of his hand as I believe he did with my North African missionary friend.

But normally his power accompanies his presence as it did in Cambus Lang in 1743 when through the preaching of a rather ordinary minister thousands were born again.

that can happen again. With us Jesus should come in the fullness of his spirit and the nets we let down for a catch are full of fish.

And then third and last what changed? The provision of Jesus. The provision of Jesus. As we close I want to come back to this perennial question.

[20 : 42] How is this all going to happen? Where will the resources come from to purchase a new building? Where will the fish come from to fill the nets we've let down for a catch and so on?

Sometimes twee is twee and sometimes twee is true. Our doctrine of salvation stands or falls on this twee truth.

the Lord will provide. He provided for us a saviour whom we could not have saved ourselves and he will provide for us now.

He will not give up on us as Glasgow City Free Church not even halfway through our work and witness 200 years of which has gone before us as a congregation of God's people.

There are many, many aspects of this passage I find deeply challenging but more than challenging there are many other aspects I find deeply comforting not the least of which is what I read between verses 9 and 14.

[21 : 47] When the disciples got back on shore they found Jesus waiting for them with a charcoal fire on which he had placed fish and bread. The fish he fried had not been caught by the disciples and the bread he baked on that fire had not been prepared by the disciples Jesus provided it for them.

Remember these men had been toiling all night they hadn't caught even a tadpole and now Jesus prepares a sumptuous breakfast for them entirely at his own expense.

Remember earlier how I said there was something familiar about this miracle of Jesus? It should have reminded them of how three years or so prior to this Jesus had performed the same miracle

and therefore he is calling upon them to recommit themselves to living as disciples. But there is also something very familiar about how Jesus prepares this meal for them. A year or so before this Jesus had used five loaves and two fish to prepare a sumptuous banquet for 5,000 men. It had been this wonderful miracle of provision where in the wilderness Jesus reminded them that just as he had provided for the wandering Israelites all those years before under Moses he could provide for his people now.

[23 : 16] Jesus reminds his people of his ability not just to fill the nets with fish but of his ability to provide for them in every area. And then in words which are so appropriate to us today but seem so familiar in verse 13 we read and Jesus and Jesus took the bread and he gave it to them and so with the fish.

Just a few days prior to this the pre-crucifixion Jesus had broken bread and when he had given thanks he gave it to them and said this is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me. In other words the Jesus who provided salvation for these men through his body given for them on the cross is reminding his disciples he will provide for them in all their fishing.

It reminds us does it not of what the apostle Paul said in Romans 8. He who did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all how will he not along with him graciously give us all things. God shall never give up on Glasgow City Free Church halfway. He'll always provide for us. And there's a sense therefore in which the search for a new center of worship and mission for us is an exercise in reminding ourselves of the providing power of Jesus as recorded in the gospels.

[24 : 54] To test out that power and to prove it in our own situations. To have faith that just like he provided for his disciples time and time again so he will provide for us now.

I keep on having to tell myself this one. We have to be patient. patient. We have to wait on his time for the place he has for us is most certainly better than the place we would choose for ourselves. And yet at the end of the day it is all of his guiding provision. And the process of waiting itself builds our faith, heightens our expectation that our gracious providing Savior will provide for us again and again with his power and with his presence.

And then what I find most remarkable of all about this passage is that although Jesus had already prepared fish for the disciples to eat, he says to them in verse 10, bring some of the fish you've just caught.

Bring some of the fish you've just caught. He chooses to use them, the disciples, and their resources. More correctly, Jesus chooses to use the fish he had caused them to miraculously catch to provide for them.

[26 : 20] Jesus chooses to use the disciples in this process of a miraculous meal. He chooses to use a little boy's pack lunch a year before to feed a crowd of 5,000 men.

He chose to use some of the fish these disciples caught to feed them. And he'll choose to use our meager resources in his mission of fishing for the souls of Glasgow's peoples.

Our time, our talent, our commitment, our money. But again, I come back to this.

The greatest miracle that day, and that for which we most yearn as Glasgow City Free Church and God's people here, is not the miraculous catch of fish, nor is it that comforting breakfast on the shore.

It is that Jesus will be present with us. More than his power, more than his provision, the presence of Jesus must always come first.

[27 : 30] If we have that presence, the power and the provision will also come. But it's the presence of Jesus for which we most yearn and for which we most pray.

It's that presence which changes everything. That presence, Hugh Martin, the old Scottish Free Church father called the abiding presence. And yes, we can have it with us here in this magnificent building on St.

Vincent Street, but we can also have it there in our new home, whatever that is. Just think about it. Full nets, warm breakfasts. More than anything else, Jesus with us.

That's what will make our new building a temple of gracious glory to the majesty of our only God and Savior and for the good of Glasgow's peoples.

Let us pray. Amen.