

153 Fish!

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[0 : 00] It was recorded on Boxing Day 2004. It was recorded at 9.0 on the Richter scale.

It comes in at something like the fourth largest since the year 1900. And the one that's just occurred on the 28th of March off the northern Sumatra coast, recorded a little bit less, in fact a lot less. It's about half the amount, but at 8.7. That was the seventh largest earthquake in only 200 years. And if you live on the west coast of the United States, then movements in the Earth's tectonic plates, they're not a surprise to you.

In fact, if you're making a trip to San Francisco and the ground starts to move, my advice is that you go to the middle of the Golden Gate Bridge because that structure's likely to be able to withstand an earthquake of about that size of the Boxing Day earthquake, 9.0.

This bridge is a fantastic structure. It's unlikely to fail. It's very flexible. But more importantly, the bridge is just a marvellous construction of cantilever and suspension.

[1 : 09] Every piece of metal in that bridge finally relates to two giant cables. And those cables finally relate to two great piers that go down into solid bedrock.

And then there are two anchors out on each side. That's the genius of a suspension bridge. Every single piece of metal, every single piece of concrete is preoccupied, if you like, with its foundation. The bridge is totally dependent on its foundation. You might recall that Jesus told the disciples when they were gathered in the upper room in John 15.

He said, I'm the vine and you're the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit because apart from me, you can do nothing.

I wonder whether you believe that. Apart from me, you can do nothing. And I don't mean, do you believe that just as far as mental assent?

[2 : 13] I mean, do you believe that in your whole person? Apart from me, Jesus says, you can do nothing. Speaking of those things of eternal worth.

And in John 20, the chapter just before the one, the section that's been read, John records that the disciples were together. In fact, they were behind locked doors when they had their first encounter with the risen Lord.

Jesus comes and he stands amongst them and in verse 21 of chapter 20, he says, peace be with you as the father has sent me, so I send you.

And so with that background, chapter 21 picks up that theme of mission. And it also picks up the theme of Peter's restoration. And the chapter has two distinct but actually linked units.

The first 14 verses, which we're looking at tonight, and then next week, verses 15 to 25. And going through these first 14 verses and then through, if you like, the rest of the chapter, John develops this theme of mission and he develops it using two metaphors.

[3 : 22] First of all, he uses the metaphor of fishing and then of shepherding. In fact, you might know that expression by hook or by crook. That expression, in fact, originated from John 21 because a hook being the symbol of a fisherman and a crook as the symbol of a shepherd.

You might like to turn then to John 21, page 883 and follow along the passage with me. You'll note that John begins his account and he says, after these things.

And he's referring to the resurrection appearances of Jesus recorded in the previous chapter, John chapter 20. And the scene that John is about to, if you like, recount to all of us and as readers, happens sometime after the first Easter day but we don't know how long after that was between the first Easter day and the ascension.

So John says, after these things Jesus showed himself and the idea that he's conveying in the word there is one of reveal, revelation. You see, John is communicating to the readers that Jesus certainly existed even if he hadn't been seen or even if he hadn't been heard by his followers.

His existence was in another world but he could and he did show himself to people. God's revelation is always he himself taking the initiative.

[4 : 52] That's always the case when God reveals himself and that's just the case here. So Jesus reveals himself to a group of disciples and they're at the Sea of Tiberias which is more commonly known in scripture as the Sea of Galilee.

Seven of the disciples are gathered together and Simon Peter's name appears first on the list and that's not a surprise because in many ways he was the unofficial leader of the bunch.

And Peter acts in character and he takes the lead and he says I'm going fishing and the rest of them chime in and they say we'll go with you. Peter the leader.

Peter the man of action. Impulsive Peter. Peter the one called by God. Peter the one who had been trained in Jesus training school for the last three years.

Peter the one who had so terribly failed the Lord in his three denials. But the Lord hadn't abandoned Peter and Peter's about to get some very very focused teaching from the Lord.

[6 : 01] So as we start chapter 21 we're sort of left with a question well what were the disciples doing in Galilee? I mean had they just simply gone home to do some fishing? Were they perhaps going back to their old way of life?

You might remember the encounter that the women had at the empty tomb with the angel as recorded in Mark 16. The angel says to them do not be alarmed you're looking for Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified.

He's been raised he's not here. Look there is the place they laid him. And then verse 7 of chapter 16 of Mark go tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee.

There you will see him just as he told you referring back to words of Jesus in Mark 14. So in fact the disciples had gone to Galilee as an act of obedience.

They'd returned to that place if you like which had been their base during the years of Jesus' ministry. And they were there if you like waiting to receive further instruction.

[7 : 05] but this period of time between the resurrection and then the ascension of Christ and the giving of the Spirit it was obviously a very uncertain time for them in their lives.

You can imagine the sort of questions that went through their minds. Questions like well what was Jesus going to do himself? What was it that they were expected to do?

How should they be spending their time? So while they wait for Jesus they go fishing. It's pretty reasonable isn't it? I mean at least it was something for them to do while they were waiting.

So in verse 3 we read they went out and they got into the boat but that night they caught nothing. And as I read that again this week I thought wow that's just my type of fisherman.

I mean I can absolutely relate to this sort of fishing. Fishing is excellent for character development. In fact when I thought of this illustration I wasn't aware that my wife Cheryl was going to be here tonight so I hope this is truthful.

[8 : 05] I'm sure it is. I can remember spending hours fishing off the rocks off the Great Ocean Road near Lorne. And in those hours I caught everything but fish.

And I'd come back and my explanations to Cheryl who was waiting back in the campground would be anything but convincing. Explanations like too much kelp, too rough, too windy, sometimes too calm.

But this wasn't Rod McArdle, these were professional fishermen. I mean imagine the frustration that they had. They'd fished right through the night, they'd caught nothing and fishing at night in the Sea of Galilee was regarded by the ones who knew as the best time to go fishing.

Nothing, nothing at all on their fishing expedition. But unlike my fishing expeditions I suspect that that was a pretty unusual experience for the disciples, these professional fishermen.

The failure is a very demoralising thing. It is painful to experience failure and yet there are valuable lessons that come out of failure.

[9 : 18] The account makes clear that it was the Lord's intention that they catch nothing on this occasion. If you think about our world today, I'm sure you agree that the world worships so-called self-made men and women.

I mean so-called self-made men and women, they're revered. They're praised in the media. Others speak of them with just undisguised envy. But can I suggest there's nothing more revealing of human ignorance than the view that we're either a self-made man or woman.

People charging through their lives and giving absolutely no thought at all to Almighty God who provides all things. Billy Graham once commented, we came out of nothing and if we are anything it is because God is everything.

If he were to withhold his power for one brief instant from us, if he were to hold in check the breath of life for one moment, our physical existence would shrivel into nothingness and our souls would be whisked away into an endless eternity.

But can I suggest unfortunately even as Christians we can easily, can I suggest in fact all too easily fall into that trap of having a self-sufficient attitude. The very gifts that the Lord graciously blesses us with can give us a false confidence that we can undertake the mission of the church without total dependence on the Lord himself.

[10:52] Well the disciples needed again to understand, to heed this essential mission before they embarked on the mission to which the Lord was sending them out.

And so Jesus teaches them and he teaches them if you like in their own backyard, in their background setting of fishing on the Sea of Galilee. So here are these frustrated disciples, they're professional fishermen, it's nearly sunrise and an unknown voice calls out from the shore, children you have no fish, have you?

Now it's unclear in this instance whether this was a time where the disciples couldn't actually recognise the Lord as we see in other encounters or whether it was simply that at that time in the early morning visibility was poor.

And the original sense of this rhetorical question that's asked is something like this, guys or lads, you haven't caught any fish have you? The one calling from the shore knew the answer.

I wonder how their professional fishing pride was fearing at that time as they answered no. I mean they were obviously not keen to elaborate on their failed fishing trip.

[12:04] I'm reminded of the priest who'd spent also a fruitless day fishing. And so on his way home he went to the market and he picked out three fat fish.

Now before you wrap them he said to the store manager, toss them to me one by one and that way I'll be able to tell the Monsignor I caught them and I'll be speaking the truth.

Well the disciples are forced to recognise that they don't have sufficient resources on their own.

Cast the net to the right side of the boat and you'll find some. And so they cast it and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish as John records.

The miracle simply reveals the identity of the person on the shore. Reveals it to the beloved disciple. He says it is the Lord. The beloved disciple probably best understood to be John himself. He proves quicker to believe than Peter doesn't he? John displays spiritual discernment. What does Peter display? Decisive action. I think we get a hint of the competition that existed between these two disciples and this competition becomes more obvious as John progresses through chapter 21 and we'll look more at that next week.

[13:23] So Peter the man of action, he wraps his robe around him, jumps off the boat and starts swimming towards the shore. And the others of course they're left to bring in the boat with this net full of fish.

Well I'm reminded of the opening episode in the current Survivor series. Maybe we should have confession at this stage for anyone who's watched Survivor. This was just the opening night of the current series.

And the contestants, I don't know if you saw this, but they're rowing towards an island just at the beginning of their adventure and they're told that the first one ashore wins immunity in this first round.

So of course one of these guys, we'll call him Peter with a small p, he acts before he thinks. He dives in, he starts swimming and then the camera sort of pans to this boat that's just going graciously past him full of competitors with beaming smiles on their face.

He didn't get to the shore first and he certainly didn't get immunity. Well the Gospel writer is emphasising through the story the principle that apart from Jesus the disciples can simply do nothing.

[14:31] And that's just as Jesus told them in the upper room back in John 15. Notice also that it's only at Jesus' intervention, notice also that it's after their admission of inability that they're able to obtain fish.

In fact it's interesting that through the four Gospels in none of the Gospel accounts do the disciples ever catch a fish without Jesus' help. Jesus had called the disciples into his service back in Luke 5. He told Simon Peter, from now on you'll be catching people. I guess learning to depend on the Lord in all things doesn't happen overnight. It didn't happen overnight for Peter and I want to suggest it doesn't happen overnight in our lives.

It was about ten years ago in fact when the Holy Spirit challenged me very strongly when I was listening to a sermon in fact on Luke 5 in those words come follow me.

I deeply sensed at the time that Christ was in fact making a very specific call on my life. So I went and got a copy of the message on tape, I went off to a quiet place, I listened to it again and I came away with an absolute certainty that Christ was indeed making a call on my life and that I wanted to be obedient to that call.

[15:54] Well what was that call? At the time it wasn't very clear. For some years following the Lord left me to work, if you like, to work for the kingdom in the secular business world.

As I look back and the question is do I understand that call today, the answer is yes. The call was to serve the Lord in a full time ministry capacity. And I don't want to pretend that I understand all of the reasons for those intervening years between that time when the call was just so absolutely certain in my mind.

But I do know that in those intervening years I had great opportunities to witness the Christ at a senior business level. And I know that I walked into a situation of tremendous difficulties, difficulties that I could have never foreseen from the outside before that last job.

They were situations that absolutely forced me to rely on the Lord. rather than to rely on myself.

The Lord is our rock, he is our refuge and right through the Psalms you just get those wonderful themes as the Lord is our rock, the Lord is our refuge and the Lord's our almighty provider.

He's our almighty provider not only in a physical sense but also in a spiritual sense. Friends, if we're going to be fruit bearers and that of course is what every Christian is called to be, to be a fruit bearer, then we're only going to be a fruit as we stay connected to Christ.

[17:31] I mean think of it perhaps as remaining attached to an unshakable foundation. Think of it as abiding in a vine. Think of it as fishing where the Lord directs.

In fact, whichever metaphor helps you. Think on it. Live your life on that basis. The basis of absolute dependence on the Lord.

Well the disciples reached the shore, it was about 90 metres, 100 yards and as they reached the shore they see a charcoal fire. It's got fish on it and there's also bread.

It's interesting that the last mention of such a charcoal fire is back in John 18 when Peter denied the Lord three times. I mean how poignant that must have been for Peter from that very hostile setting of the questioning that he got when he denied the Lord to this wonderfully inviting setting now.

Breakfast was waiting for them. Before the cross, of course Jesus had washed the disciples' feet as we read in John 13 and now the risen Lord, the risen Lord is still serving them.

[18:45] They're tired and he greets them with a hot breakfast. I find that a really powerful illustration that all we have comes from the very hand of God.

It's God who provides our food. It's God who provides the opportunities that come our way. I mean for example on the surface you might have a situation where you encounter someone and say wow, excuse me, where on earth did that come from?

That seemed to come completely out of left field. But the providential hand of God has been at work leading us into situations that we could have never designed ourselves.

Well Jesus says to them, bring some of the fish that you've just caught. Kind of interesting isn't it? Jesus enables his followers and then he uses what they procure.

He enables his followers and then he uses what they procure. And that's a good illustration spiritually of the way that the Lord works with us because it's by his grace that he uses us as co-laborers, as co-laborers in his great mission of salvation.

[19:57] Well, in verse 11, Peter still has energy after his swim. He in fact hauls the fish ashore. 153 fish.

Now if you go and look at the commentaries you're going to find many pages, an unnecessary amount of space given over to all sorts of theories about 153.

I want to suggest that all of those theories are pretty fishy. The most likely reason that these fish have been counted is simply because the fish are going to be divided up among the fishermen.

And that's what you did. It's probably also very likely that this number was remembered because this was one great catch of fish. Notice also that the fishing net was still intact.

I mean, the symbolism that's operating in this story as recorded by John suggests that the gospel net will never break regardless, regardless of the number of followers of Jesus Christ.

[21 : 02] Well, despite the disciples' eagerness to be with the Lord, the text suggests they also had some unease. The writer notes that they, quote, they knew that it was the Lord.

But what was the source of this unease? I mean, perhaps the disciples were still trying to get their mind around a crucified and resurrected Messiah.

But again, it's Jesus who takes the initiative. He says, come and have some breakfast. And that's a great invitation, isn't it? After a frustrating, fruitless night of fishing.

They'd caught nothing. And perhaps as they heard those inviting words of Jesus, come and have some breakfast. Perhaps as they smelt the aroma of barbecue fish.

Perhaps their minds then would have gone back. They would have recalled that extraordinary scene in John 6 when Jesus had fed that very large crowd and he'd fed it just with five barley loaves and two fish.

[22 : 10] Without me, Jesus says, you can do nothing. And that tremendously inviting barbecue fish scene, well, that becomes the context as you move into the next unit of John 21 that we'll look at next Sunday night where Jesus says, feed my lambs.

I want to suggest that we get the sense that the disciples' unease gives way to just deep joy at being in the very presence of the risen Lord. If you think about the application of this story, chapter 21 is an epilogue.

If you like, it's an epilogue which is addressed to the church and the church's responsibilities in the world. Don't neglect the fish. But what are the fish?

Well, they're certainly a practical gift, but importantly, they're a symbol of divine work. Jesus is emphasising that he will continue to be with the disciples.

He'll still be the disciples' champion. He'd earlier told them that when he departs, when he ascends, that he would send another comforter. They're not alone.

[23 : 27] And we today in the 21st century, we're not alone. The disciples were to continue the ministry of Jesus. And we today, we tonight, are to continue that very ministry of Jesus as well.

Fishing for men and women is not to be neglected. With Jesus' help, we can find catches that are beyond our wildest dreams or imagination.

But John 21 isn't a call for extra energy. It's not a call for extra skill. John 21 is a call of trust.

It's a call of submission in each of our lives. We are to gather those to whom Christ directs us. And we're to nurture those who live in his flock, as the rest of John 21 speaks of.

Authentic ministry is Christ-directed and it's empowered ministry. It's ministry in the power of the Holy Spirit. It's ministry in the power of the Spirit of Christ, as Scripture also uses that term to describe the Holy Spirit.

[24 : 39] We're to trust Christ in the work of his mission and we're not to put confidence in ourselves, or if you like, not to put confidence in our flesh. The psalmist in Psalm 127 writes these well-known words, Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labour in vain.

Unless the Lord guards the city, the guard keeps watch in vain. It strikes me that the modern church often seems to miss that critical point, and the modern church particularly in the West.

There was a Christian advertising agent who in fact had represented the Coca-Cola Corporation. And this guy stated brazenly as follows.

He says, Back in Jerusalem where the church started, God performed a miracle there on the day of Pentecost. They of course didn't have the benefits of buttons and media. So God had to do a little supernatural work there.

But today, with our technology, we have available to us the opportunity to create the same kind of interest in a secular society. Friends, that sort of attitude absolutely and totally misses the point.

[25 : 53] Technology can be a useful tool. But of itself, it is totally and completely powerless. We need to stay connected to the power source.

We need to trust only in the power source. Unredeemed men and women, unredeemed men and women before, just like us, before we put our faith and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, spiritually dead in our transgressions and sins, can only be made alive, can only be regenerated by the work of a merciful God.

Without the Lord, we simply can do nothing of eternal worth. Well, John concludes this first section of John chapter 21 by recording that this was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

Friends, we do indeed serve a crucified and risen saviour. And he calls each one of us as believers, that is, those who've placed their personal faith and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, he calls each of us to be fruit bearers.

He calls each of us to be ambassadors in his ministry of reconciliation. He calls each of us to be fishers of men and women.

[27 : 24] each time I reflect on that, the thought I guess that just immediately comes to my mind is what an extraordinary privilege that is as an adopted child of God.

But we need to do it in total dependence on the Lord. That dependence on the Lord is going to be reflected in the priority that we give to his word, to the scriptures, to the Bible.

our total dependence on the Lord is going to be reflected in the commitment that we have to communing with God in prayer. I guess like every message, the message probably speaks loudest than most convicting to the one who's delivering it.

Because I find personally that a great challenge. Our commitment to the Lord will be reflected, our dependence on the Lord will be reflected in the priority we put on his word and the priority that we put on communing with him in prayer.

That's a great challenge to me. Is it a challenge to you? God bless you. God bless you.

[28 : 56] God bless you.