



# Sermon by Rev Ross Pearce Highfield Road Uniting Church January 31, 2016

## Luke 5: 1-11

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Don't you just love Peter! He's one of the most real characters in scripture; as for many of us, there seems to be very little filter between thought and speech. Time and again in the gospel stories it is Peter who says something that's a bit wrong although well intended. Who else but Peter could say to Jesus, "Get away from me", when they are in a boat in the middle of the Sea of Galilee? Where does he expect Jesus to go, walk on water? However, as for all the other times that Peter says something a bit wrong, there is something serious happening in the story and it's best not to get lost in laughing at Peter. In Mark we read that Jesus walked up to Peter and said "Follow me and I will make you fish for people". Luke must have thought that a bit too simplistic because he went to a lot of trouble composing a much more complex and convincing account of the call of Peter. He has both reordered Mark's material and added some other material. And when that sort of rewriting occurs, my immediate thought is why? I don't think it is just because Luke thought the Mark story a bit too simplistic. I think he saw a chance to use Peter – the everyman character – to give a more realistic account of what was a very real issue in the early church – conversion. What does it take for someone to accept Jesus and change their life? A persuasive word? A charismatic figure? A miracle? Or is it more complex and requires all of those things?

Think back on your own experience; what did it take for you to set aside your understanding of the world and yourself and accept the life of faith in Jesus Christ? Was it a charismatic figure and a persuasive word? Or was it a personal experience of a spiritual nature? Or was it a slow growth of word and experience and mentoring? We each have a different story and for some it is a life-long one, beginning with parents and Sunday School and for some it is a youth or adult decision. For some it is a spiritual experience and for some it is a matter of deep thought and reflection. For some it is still a growing question born of a feeling that pure rational thought and humanism doesn't answer all the questions of life. For Luke, writing to a patron in Rome in a religious culture where accepting Jesus meant rejecting some other god or philosophy, Mark's simple "Follow me" didn't quite answer the question of conversion. And so he takes Peter, and the reader, on a journey of discovery with this itinerant preacher.

Prior to calling the disciples at the sea, in chapter 4, Jesus leaves Nazareth after getting rejected by the people in the synagogue and goes to Capernaum and teaches in their synagogue. He gets a better response, mainly through a display of authority and then the

journey of Peter – here called Simon- begins. Luke leaves open the inference that Peter is at that synagogue and witnesses Jesus teaching because immediately Jesus goes from the synagogue to Peter’s house. There Jesus heals Peter’s mother in law. So the journey of Peter’s conversion is slowly unfolding. That is the background to the call story as we heard this morning; there is more to this than Mark’s simple account of the call. There is an inference here that Jesus is standing beside the boats because he is already a friend of Peter. Asking to get in the boat to teach the crowd that is threatening to push him into the water is not such a strange thing with that background. Peter has heard him teach in the synagogue, seen him heal and now sees the great reaction of the crowds. Is it any wonder that he calls Jesus master and agrees to return to fishing even though they had been out all night and caught nothing? The seemingly miraculous catch of fish, so much that it threatens to swamp two boats, seals the conversion deal for Peter. Even if you downplay the miraculous, here is a demonstration of Jesus knowledge and authority. For Peter, this Jesus is not just another teacher, he is not just a new prophet, Peter’s only language is to call Jesus Lord and think of himself as an unworthy person to be in the presence of divine holiness; “Get away from me, I am sinful”. This is much more than the seemingly ridiculous statement we might laugh at; here is the point of conversion. The journey to Jesus is completed with a demonstration that puts all the other experiences of the journey into an understandable, relevant package. We don’t know what the preaching was in the synagogue, we don’t know what the preaching was in the boat; Peter may have heard, and then seen in the catch of fish, allusions to God and the Exodus, because his reaction is like the people at Mt Sinai – “Keep God away from us”. However Jesus response is more gracious than Peter’s fear and guilt. “Do not be afraid”. “This is not about retribution and sin and guilt, I accept you for who you are and I am calling you to come with me and join in the mission of bringing others into God’s reign”. Incidentally, Luke makes another change from Mark; the metaphor ‘fishers of men’, that we are used to hearing, has a negative connotation in that you usually kill fish that you catch. Luke uses a term that more literally means capture alive.

Simon the fisherman from Capernaum is taken on a journey of conversion to see this new preacher as someone much more like God. Not just a look and a word from a stranger but a string of experiences that opened up new understandings of himself and Jesus. But, interestingly, Luke both says and infers that a whole new journey begins from that point of conversion. Jesus issues the call by saying, ‘from now on you will be catching people’, and Luke slips into one verse the double name Simon Peter. Simon the fisherman begins the journey to become Peter the Apostle. So, maybe Luke is both amplifying the story of Peter’s conversion to make it more believable and connectable to ordinary people who don’t have the chance to go down to the Sea and hear Jesus preach, and at the same time implying that the story of conversion isn’t as important as the life you live with God in faith after conversion.

I was once told by an evangelical person that I was not a Christian if I couldn't name the day, the hour and the minute of my conversion. The Gospels, and more particularly the Epistles, paint a very different picture than that. As important as the connection to and acceptance of Jesus is, the life that you live after that is much more important. Indeed, as I alluded to before, for many people the two journeys overlap, you discover just enough to keep journeying and keep discovering. Conversion is not a point but an ongoing development that you can only see by looking back to what you believed and did many years ago.

Yes, we can look to a string of experiences that brought us to a place of faith – for some that may be one experience – but we can also look to a string of experiences and revelations and learnings that have reinforced that faith. Experiences that have built a more complete picture of who Jesus is and helped us to follow Jesus in the mission of making the love of God known to the world.