On July 6th 1980 at about 7:45 pm, a life was transformed, or at least that process began. It was the moment a troubled and self-destructive teenager consciously became a follower of a subsistence manual worker from Palestine, Jesus Christ. The young man regards that moment as the point at which he was ‘converted.’ It was a dramatic experience, in a moment changing the orientation of a life, transforming his frame of reference from destruction towards life. Of course, the experience was the culmination of one process and the start of a much longer one. For the young man, becoming a follower included a clear and definite call to evangelism for it was simply not possible to separate becoming a follower himself from inviting other people to follow Jesus with him. The two go together.

Another dimension to this story is the failure of the Church that took 17 years to reach the youth. The Christian’s call to evangelism is also a call to the Church – it is a reminder that the most sacred ministry of incarnating Jesus in word and deed and of reconciling people and all of creation to God needs to be at the centre of the work of the people of God. If it is not, the Church has lost its vocation and its reason for being. It has lost its taste like the salt in Matt. 5 and ‘it is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled underfoot.’

This article looks at another story of Jesus and his impact on people, specifically on a small group of fishermen in Palestine. As we explore the story we will see that Jesus offered them the same invita-
tion to follow him as he did the young man referred to above. The same vocation also continues to be requested and demanded. To appreciate this story we need to explore the background to it, particularly about the fishing industry and tax system of the time, as well as a couple of cultural aspects hidden within the text. As we explore the text we find that through it God still has an agenda for the Church, one that calls the Church towards life, justice and equality, but this is radical vocation. It is the call to *holistic evangelism* and not some insipid christianised version of a secular human rights narrative: it is far more radical than that.

We will start by setting the scene in three distinct ways: the global geo-political context of the time, the local situation and then the culture of the text itself.

1 **Setting the Scene: the big picture in Luke 5:1-11**

Jesus began his formal ministry when he was about thirty years old (Luke 3:23) with his baptism by John. Luke takes some care to tell us when this was (3:1). John began his own ministry: (1) in the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar, (2) when Pilate was Governor of Judea, (3) when Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, (4) Philip, one of Herod’s brothers, tetrarch of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and (5) Lysanias, another brother, tetrarch of Abilene, and (6) during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas. There are six pointers here that can give a reasonable time frame¹.

1) Tiberius became Emperor in 14 AD, implying that John started his own ministry in 29 AD.

2) Pilate was governor (prefect) of Judea between 26 and 36 AD. He was promoted under the influence of Sejanus, a one time favourite of Tiberius. But Sejanus fell from grace in 31 AD and this placed Pilate in a weaker political position.

3) Herod Antipas was tetrarch from 4 BC until his death in 39 AD.

4) Philip was tetrarch from 4 BC until his death in about 34 AD.

5) Little is known of Lysanius, other than that there is an inscription which places him as tetrarch of Abilene definitely sometime between 14 AD and 29 AD, but does not rule out a longer tenure of office.

6) Caiaphas was high priest between 18 AD and 37 AD; Annas was High Priest between 6 AD and 15 AD, when he was deposed but he retained a high level of religious and political power, exercised by his son-in-law, one Caiaphas.

The ministries of both John and Jesus are therefore placed in an historical context by Luke, embracing the whole of the then-known world. This embrace includes the military and political context of the Roman Empire as well as the religious one within Palestine. Both ministries were begun and ended under a brutal military occupation. Jesus’ religious context is further emphasised by the genealogy at the end of Luke 3.

John the Baptist preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. What this means in terms of behaviour is spelt out in terms of the crowds (3:10, 11), tax collectors (3:12, 13) and soldiers (3:14). The people were in a state of expectation (3:15) and wondered if John was the Christ. To this, John points to the ‘One’ who is mightier than he. In these ways, he ‘preached the gospel to the people’. The

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word used is euaggelizo, so a more literal translation would be, ‘he evangelised the people.’ In due course, Jesus came to John and was baptised, and this was followed by the temptation in the wilderness (4:1-13). This was followed by the beginning of Jesus’ *public* ministry.

## 2 Setting the Scene: the local picture

### 2.1 The Start of the Public Ministry

Very quickly Jesus’ fame spread, and He began teaching in the local synagogues of Galilee (14, 15). The geography here is important.

Galilee was a region containing mainly villages and small towns. It was known as Galilee of the Gentiles as it had so often been under foreign occupation throughout history. Between the 8th and 2nd centuries BC it was controlled successively by the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Macedonians, Egyptians and Seleucids and the area experienced continual immigration. By the time of Jesus, Galileans had their own distinctive accent which was used as the basis for the accusation made against Simon Peter in Mt 26:73. The Jewish population was a minority among a Gentile majority.

Nazareth is up in the hills, away from the shore of the Sea of Galilee. It is not mentioned in the Old Testament. It was settled during the 2nd century BC and is known to have remained an all-Jewish town until the 4th century. Indeed after the fall of Jerusalem one of the courses of priests from Jerusalem settled there.

Down in the valleys, Jesus’ fame is rising and news is spreading. Up in the hills he gets a different reception. The two reactions to Jesus are noted by Luke (4:28, 29 compared with 31, 32). It is also clear that there is some relationship with Simon’s family (4:38, 39). Jesus’ fame

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3 Mt 4:15, quoting Is 9:1.
4 [www.welcometohosanna.com](http://www.welcometohosanna.com)

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spreads and his reputation grows. It is against this background that the story is set.

2.2 The Galilean Fishing Industry

The fishing industry, like most industries in a context of foreign occupation, was ultimately controlled by the ruling elite with the aim of maximising tax revenues. We are not talking here of a free enterprise state such as Britain was and the USA is; instead we are talking of imperialism. The fishing rights were sold by the ruling elite (Herod) to intermediaries (telōnaı̂) often translated as ‘tax collectors’. These are the people who had direct and contractual arrangements with the local fishermen, and the fishermen had one source of capitalization – the broker. The power relationship was very much one-way.

However, fishermen did cooperate with each other. In 1986 a boat was discovered in the mud along the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee, just north of ancient Magdala (from whence Mary Magdalene came). It is 26.5 feet long, 7.5 feet wide and 4.5 feet deep. It is primarily made of cedar and oak, but other woods were used as well. It has been dated to between 40 BC and 70 AD, so is a contemporary of the boats used at the time of Jesus’ ministry. The boat had a sail and places for four rowers and one tiller and could accommodate a load of about one ton (five crew and their catch or crew and about ten passengers). Fish was processed and exported (even Pliny the Elder makes reference to Judean processed fish).

The fishermen were also dependent upon others in the business: they had suppliers (timber, sail cloth, net flax from farmers, stonemasons for their stone anchors), on occasion hired labourers, and processors and distributors. The whole system was regulated by the interests

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of the elite, most notably through taxation, and any ‘surplus’ most likely went to the brokers, not the fishermen. The fishermen were kept at the level of subsistence, as were the other local peasants. The peasant society was mainly controlled through ties of kinship and the religious institutions – synagogues, scribes, priests and the like.

2.3 Following your Rabbi

By the age of thirteen most boys would have finished their formal education and been apprenticed to a trade. Only the most talented would have stayed on for further training at the bet midrash (house of interpretation), and only the most talented of those would have gone on to train under a rabbi. The fishermen in the story would not have been considered among the most talented, because they were fishermen, not rabbis-in-training. They were subsistence-level agricultural workers and not among the powerful, the rulers, the rich. They were not numbered among those who could change the world.


The text follows a standard rhetorical device, sometimes called the ‘prophetic rhetorical template’ and consists of seven inverted stanzas (or scenes) within the narrative. This is important because of the cultural framework we tend to follow when engaging with texts. The Western approach is to see things in a linear manner, with a beginning, a middle and an end. In this approach, it is the end which is given the emphasis and therefore seen as the most important part of the narrative. For example, we develop a story or plot or paper to arrive at conclusions or endings. The ancient Jews, however, used the

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1 I draw from Kenneth E Bailey’s Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels, London: SPCK 2008, ch. 11 ‘The Call of Peter’
2 It is worth noting that this may now be changing with the invention of the Internet which by its nature is non-linear: the consumer of information has a high level of
inverted stanza approach to vary the emphasis within a text. The seven stanzas are:

1. The boat goes out (Jesus teaches)
2. Jesus speaks to Peter (catch fish!)
3. Peter speaks to Jesus (in arrogance)
4. Dramatic catch of fish (nature miracle)
5. Peter speaks to Jesus (in repentance)
6. Jesus speaks to Peter (catch people)
7. The boat returns (they follow Jesus)

So in 1 and 7 the boat goes out and comes back; in 2 and 6 Jesus speaks to Peter; in 3 and 5 Peter speaks to Jesus and in 4 there is the amazing catch of fish. There is an extra note in 5b (v 9) which breaks the smooth flow of the stanzas: it is quite possible that Luke added this explanatory note, in which case the original text (before Luke recorded it) was just the seven stanzas and may give us a glimpse of how the earliest oral Gospel texts were memorized. Here is the text of the passage:

1 Now it happened that while the crowd was pressing around Him and listening to the word of God, He was standing by the lake of Gennesaret; 2 and He saw two boats lying at the edge of the lake; but the fishermen had gotten out of them and were washing their nets. 3 And He got into one of the boats, which was Simon's, and asked him to put out a little way from the land. And He sat down and began teaching the people from the boat. 4 When He had finished speaking, He said to Simon, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.” 5 Simon answered and said, “Master, we worked hard all night and caught nothing, but I will do as You say and let down the nets.”

control over the way information is accessed and appropriated (for example, following different threads through hyperlinks).
When they had done this, they enclosed a great quantity of fish, and their nets began to break; so they signalled to their partners in the other boat for them to come and help them. And they came and filled both of the boats, so that they began to sink.

But when Simon Peter saw that, he fell down at Jesus' feet, saying, “Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man!”

For amazement had seized him and all his companions because of the catch of fish which they had taken; and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. And Jesus said to Simon, “Do not fear, from now on you will be catching men.”

When they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed Him.

In Western cultures we tend towards a linear approach to narratives. We do use literary techniques to power the plot forwards, adding twists and sub-plots to keep the narrative alive. Other cultures adopt different literary techniques and in this story such a device is being used. The effect is to give the story two main points: the first one is clearly the catch of fish in verse 6, and the second is the disciples leaving everything and following Jesus. The two events are linked not only by chronology but structurally in the way Luke has presented his material. We do well to note such literary devices for they can help shed deeper insight into the narrative.

4 Deeper Insights

4.1 Peter’s Story - Following
Fishermen were not regarded as those who had the power or ability to change the world. They had not been selected as rabbis-in-training. They were low-level, subsistence workers and the socio-economic system was designed to keep them that way. They worked hard and of-
ten worked anti-social hours. Their lives were highly structured: fish-
ermen they were and fishermen they would remain. That was their lot
in life. They lived in a multi-cultural context: they were exposed to
both Jews and Gentiles and at least in this respect, there was some col-
our leaking in to what was otherwise a monochrome existence. Fam-
ilies were important both in terms of the social fabric of society but also
economically and personally. The two sets of brothers in the passage,
Simon and Andrew, and James and John, had close-knit family ties.
The tax system ensured that they would never be rich and probably
never earn enough to break free of the debts they accrued in raising
capitalization for their boats. The only source of such capital was the
local tax collector.

I remember the first time I visited Rome, one of the most fascina-
ting cities on earth. One evening my colleagues and I went for a walk
into the city centre and as we walked under the setting sun, with the
ancient ruins, monuments and buildings, I remember being struck by
one over-empowering realisation: two men changed not only the city
but the entire Roman Empire. Their stories are told and retold
through architecture and art. Images of their lives and deaths are por-
trayed, sometimes very graphically, for they both met their deaths in
the Eternal City. The most magnificent building in Rome is named
after one of them and his mortal remains, according to some archae-
ologists, lie under this building to this day. Far from having a mono-
chrome life, Simon Peter had a remarkably colourful one and the
turning point – from still-life black and white to a rich and textured
techni-colour masterpiece – is recorded in this passage.

The pivot for Simon Peter is the miraculous catch of fish, the first
main point of the narrative. In turn, the power behind the story is that
of Jesus, the key figure in the Gospel narratives and in Peter’s personal
story. For the fisherman, the miracle is primarily economic: this sub-
sistence-level carpenter – a carpenter from the mountains, no less!
clearly has the power to ensure Peter’s fishing success. Peter, with Jesus, could break free from the clutches of poverty, providing economic security for them. Interestingly, Peter’s response to Jesus is an acknowledgement of his own sinfulness. He is amazed, not only by the huge number of fish but by the power of Jesus. In verse 5 Peter refers to Jesus as ‘Master’ a respectful term certainly (although he is at pains to point out that in his area of expertise – fishing – he knows his stuff and the fish are simply not biting), but lacking the theological and spiritual depth of the word he now uses in verse 8: ‘Lord.’ The sweaty, slippery work of hauling in the catch has been the context in which Peter’s story is changed. His posture is important: he humbles himself before Jesus, falling down at Jesus’ knees, amidst the still floundering fish, and he acknowledges his sinfulness. Note that Master opens Peter’s first speech to Jesus, but here Lord closes his second speech. Simon is aware that he is the presence of a holy person and this forces him to face his own sinfulness. It does not happen within a religious framework, at a synagogue, but in the context of Peter’s work. Simon’s words are telling: depart from me, he tells Jesus. His understanding of Jesus has developed, but he still believes that the unclean can defile the clean and holy: Jesus has a different perspective, namely that forgiveness is available to the unclean from the clean. The dynamic of defilement is reversed in Jesus: he makes the guilty clean by bringing forgiveness, by drawing close, by sharing in Simon’s world. Only then can Simon enter into His world of the Kingdom, of technicolour, dancing and life.

The fundamental starting point in Peter becoming a change-agent in this world is in him being changed within his unstable, wet and slippery world. Evangelism is ever the same in this respect: first our stories must be transformed as we encounter the story of Jesus. Only then can we truly respond to the primary vocation of all disciples throughout all ages to ‘come, follow.’ However, the secondary
priority – again of all disciples throughout all ages, which cannot be separated from the first – is evangelism. It is to this we now turn.

4.2 Peter’s Story - Catching Men
Luke was a careful historian. He shows the same care in his use of words as he does with historical details. The word he uses in verse 10 is different from the word used in the parallel passages in Matthew and Mark. In Luke we find ‘Jesus said to Simon, “Do not fear, from now on you will be catching men”’ whereas the other two synoptic authors say that Jesus ‘said to them, “Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.”’ The word used is the usual one for fishing, aleicis’ (Matt. 4:19 and Mark 1:17). Luke chooses to use zogreo, which comes from two different words, zoos meaning ‘alive’ (from which we get the English word, ‘zoo’) and agreuo, ‘to hunt or catch.’ The word is used, for example in Homer, of sparing the lives of captured enemy combatants. Thus, there is a subtle but significant difference: Peter has been fishing and the fish are gutted and eaten: they die. Luke, however, is saying that Peter’s future purpose is to catch in order to give life. This places a different emphasis upon the concept of ‘catching people’ which is a metaphor for evangelism in this passage. Evangelism is intended to be wholesome, positive and life-giving. Consider it this way: natural history museums collect dead animals whereas zoos collect and breed live animals. Is the Christian community that you are part of concerned primarily with life, like zoos, or more like a museum, focused upon things that once were but are no longer alive? Is the message offered by your community one of life for now as well as the hereafter, or does the dust of the ancients clog contemporary vitality?
I am reminded of many examples of Christian communities offering such life to the lost, the least and the last. I offer here one such example, first published on a blog I was running in 2010.

The Salvation Army is growing in Cuba. Much of this growth is simply because the Army gets involved in the messiness of human existence.

Here’s Jorge’s story. Like Sandy’s story below, it begins with dysfunction which led Jorge to develop a destructive dependency on alcohol. His family left him, his friends deserted him. He lost his home, his job, his dignity. He slept by the banks of a river in Camagüey, using cardboard and sack cloth for warmth. His health deteriorated and on January 2nd 2007 he was admitted to hospital for alcoholism and accompanying health problems. It was whilst in hospital that he heard about the Salvation Army’s New Life Project and realised that he was being offered a chance to turn his life around.

It was a very tough path for him. The struggles towards abstinence led to a nervous breakdown and to self-harm. But he did not give up. The prayers of the Army congregation strengthened and encouraged him. And, slowly, after a long period of detox, with occupational therapy and the spiritual support of the Army, he won. The Good News came to him not only in becoming free of alcohol dependency, but also by accepting Jesus as his Saviour & Lord. This conversion experience gave him renewed determination and strength and he became a Salvation Army soldier in December of 2007.

He was reunited with his family and resumed his roles as husband and father. He continues to support others in the New Life Project. And all because the Salvation Army was the Good News for him before simply talking to him about it. So today Jorge is in turn the Good News to others as his life continues to be transformed by Jesus.

Published 2010 on the Evangelism blog at the World Council of Churches website, since removed.
I do not wish to place too much weight upon just one word in the text, although it is reasonable to suppose that Luke - the only Gospel writer to speak and write in Greek as his first language - used the word deliberately. He did intend it to carry some weight. But it is as we consider the rest of his Gospel that we start to catch glimpses of what Luke is driving at. For example, Luke places an emphasis upon the poor, the marginalized, the weak and the vulnerable (or as a friend of mine puts it, ‘the least, the last and the lost’). There is a legitimate challenge that asks how do we as Christian communities bring life to such people? How do we mimic the ministry of Jesus Himself? What does it mean to bring life? Luke gives answers to these questions, holding up Jesus not only as Saviour, but as an example for us to follow.

We have noted how Peter was captivated by Jesus in this narrative. In the third stanza Peter’s response to Jesus, as master, was arrogant, whereas in the fifth he is repentant before the Lord. He was caught by Jesus. In other words, Jesus is not only calling Peter to a life of catching people, he is showing him how it is done and this not simply through the preaching to a crowd in verse 3 but through the transformation of one story, Peter’s own story, in verse 8. Peter is not so much assenting to a set of doctrine (although he does) so much as being caught up in a story so much bigger than his own. The subsistence worker, overlooked by both the rabbis and their formal religious structures and the occupying military forces, is being called to be a follower and catcher. This vocation remains true today for everyone who is called to follow Jesus is also called to catch people, bringing them life. If we are not actively and intentionally caught up in bringing life, perhaps we have never been truly caught ourselves.

4.3 Jesus, the source of life
Life in this story is clearly focused upon Jesus, not upon some utopian view of society. The transformation is a complete re-orientating of
Peter’s life from subsistence worker to following the Lord. This itself is a political statement for it acknowledges ‘Jesus is Lord’, the supreme authority even above Caesar. But following Him is first and foremost a personal commitment; the spiritual and political implications are profound and radical, but they flow out of the personal relationship of fisherman to Lord. The primary narrative in all theology and missiology must always be the story of Jesus. Missiology can never be faithful to the Gospel when it draws *primarily* upon social, political or cultural narratives, which has happened too often throughout Church history and continues to this day. Our understanding of life – and justice and equality – must of necessity be drawn first and foremost from the story of Jesus. Otherwise it is simply not Christian.

4.4 The New Community

There is a further point that is of significance and takes us back to the socio-economic conditions mentioned above. It just so happens that we have some information about the broker in Capernaum at this time, the person who was ‘one over’ the fishermen and most likely was the one who both capitalized the fishermen and to whom they paid taxes. He was called Levi, or Matthew. And he is the next named person that Jesus called to ‘follow him.’ So among the very earliest followers of Jesus was the beginning of a new community in which existing relationships by necessity was transformed by the strength of character of the person they followed: Jesus. Both social and economic relationships were challenged and transformed:

> After that He went out and noticed a tax collector named Levi sitting in the tax booth, and He said to him, “Follow Me.”

> And he left everything behind, and got up and began to follow Him.

> And Levi gave a big reception for Him in his house; and there was a great crowd of tax collectors and other people who were reclining at the table with them.
The Pharisees and their scribes began grumbling at His disciples, saying, “Why do you eat and drink with the tax collectors and sinners?”

And Jesus answered and said to them, “It is not those who are well who need a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.”

There are implications here for contemporary followers of Christ. Jesus instituted a new community, a life-giving and life-sharing community, in which the accepted norms of social and economic relationships were turned upside down. In this community power is redefined so that the least will be the greatest (9:48), the first will be the last and the last, first (13:30) and those who humble themselves will be exalted (14:11). Characteristics of this community include the welcoming of ‘sinners and tax collectors,’ generosity to the poor, compassion for the sick, concern for the lost, commitment to truth and obedience, among many others. Justice and equality are understood in relation to Jesus. They are not isolated concepts, standing apart from the historical person of Jesus Christ. We do not have the liberty of using such concepts to develop missiology apart from the person of Jesus. To do so is to create a travesty of the Gospel.

One example of this practice comes from a recent visit to India, where I attended a national-level consultation in which the caste system was named as ‘evil.’ The system is ancient, dating back thousands of years. It is a form of social control, limiting power to an elite caste whilst the vast majority of people are excluded from social and power structures. The Christian Church should be very different from this; caste should have absolutely no place within the Church. Instead, vocation and gifting should be the foundation upon which the structures of the Church are developed: anything less than this is an offence to the Gospel of Jesus. Sadly, this is yet to be achieved. Other examples include the employment policies adopted by many Christian organisations in which power resides with a (usually self-selecting) few and
can be exercised with a lack of compassion, justice and care; the preferential treatment with which large donors may be treated compared to those who give more sacrificially because their money does not stretch so far; the misogyny which excludes women or the racism that excludes people of the ‘wrong’ ethnicity (as a white male European I have also suffered this).

5 Conclusion

Jesus gives Simon Peter the vocation to follow and the task of pursuing His mission. It is explicit: catch people. It is also modelled. This modelling is the basis upon which we should build our understanding of evangelism, and offers us a simple definition of the term: evangelism is nothing less than ‘catching people’ and holistic evangelism is the methodology Jesus offered by teaching and example.

As for the young man who opened this piece, he has tried to follow the subsistence worker from Palestine, trying to pass on to others what he found on 6th July 1980 – that the life Jesus offers is life in all its fullness. He has tried all sorts of methods: preaching in bars and clubs, in the streets and markets, in churches, schools and universities; caring for individuals broken by life; through hospitality (given and received); talking with people on trains and planes and in automobiles. But the best methodology by far is a life lived well in obedience to Jesus, simply trying to love and be loved and slowly being transformed by God’s love. I am far – very far – from getting it right but I am on the Way.

References


