

# **St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore**

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## **ENCOUNTERS WITH JESUS - PETER**

**14<sup>th</sup> February 2016**

Isaiah 6:1-8

Luke 5:1-11

During the weeks of Lent in our services we are going to be thinking about encounters with Jesus. We will be concentrating on some of the various people we read of in the Gospels who met Jesus in various circumstances and with various outcomes. Today we are thinking of that man who was to become the chief, the spokesman for all the disciples: Peter.

What was it like for Peter when on a sunny day Jesus came out of nowhere and called him to follow? We don't know; and in fact that is the wrong question to ask ourselves, because it wasn't like that. You could think it was if you just opened Luke's gospel and read the incident which we did today. But even Luke makes it clear that Peter had met Jesus before, while John's gospel gives us more context for their meeting.

It began with Andrew. Andrew was one of those who had gone to the Jordan to see what John the Baptist was up to, and who, hearing him, had remained to learn what he could from him. Andrew had become a disciple of John. It was John, whose whole message was one of preparing people to listen to someone else, who pointed out to Andrew and a friend that the person he had been speaking about was Jesus, and that this had been shown to him because when he baptised Jesus he had seen the Spirit of God rest on him. And so Andrew, who was a good disciple, which means not that he had unswerving loyalty but that he had listened and learned and understood, Andrew immediately turned away from John and went after Jesus. You might say Andrew was John the Baptist's best disciple, because he did what John wanted done – he turned away to Jesus.

Andrew was also a good disciple because he took on the mantle of his teacher, John. If John had been pointing to Jesus, then Andrew would do the same, now that he knew who it was he had to point people to. And so he introduced Peter – or Simon.

Jesus' next recorded encounter with Simon Peter is written for us in Luke's gospel, between the story of Jesus in the synagogue at Nazareth, which we have read so recently, and the story which we read this morning. Jesus leaves Nazareth where he had provoked a reaction and went to Capernaum, where he was at home, and again he was teaching in the synagogue on the Sabbath. He healed a man who couldn't help shouting out during the service and then he went to Simon Peter's house, which suggests that he and Peter had become friends of some sort by now. He goes there, heals his mother-in-law and then relaxes and eats the meal which is provided.

Then he goes away for a while, to a deserted place, off to meet with his Father in heaven, off to work out what he should do next and where he should go. And what he

does is to go around Judea teaching in the synagogues, until one day, not a Sabbath, since the people are at the lakeside, since the fishing boats have been out all night – and the Sabbath begins in the evening, so they wouldn't have done that on a Sabbath night – one day he comes to the lake of Gennesaret, which is just an earlier name for the lake Galilee. By now Jesus was well known in the locality and so the crowds gathered to hear him teach. And he saw that he could use a boat as a kind of pulpit, so he did. Mark suggests that this was one occasion when he told his parable of the sower and the seed – I am sure that he told his parables more than once, in different locations to different people – no preacher wants to waste good material!

However, Luke is not concerned about what Jesus taught that day, he is concerned with what happened afterwards. And what happened was that Jesus, maybe wanting to thank Peter for the use of his boat, suggests that he should put out into deeper water and put down his nets. Now midday is not the time to go fishing, especially in warm, bright countries. The fish are not stupid and they stay in the deeper, darker, cooler water then. Peter knew that. He might not have known much about lots of things, but he did know about fish. He starts to object "*We worked hard all night long and have caught nothing.*" And the subtext here is maybe along the lines of "We do know our job and we are tired." But then he finishes his sentence, maybe remembering his mother-in-law or the man in the synagogue who had been healed, "*Yet, if you say so I will let down the nets.*" And he does and we know what happened, how they needed help to land the catch it was so great. And Simon Peter does not gloat over his rich catch. He falls down at Jesus feet and says "*Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.*"

It is a very similar reaction to that of Isaiah when he sees a vision of God in the temple. "*Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts!*"

We can go on for a long time, knowing about God, believing about God, knowing the story of his power and his love, believing that he is living and active and that he is involved in the world, but when we meet him, when we get a glimpse, however fleeting or momentary, of God's real presence, all that knowledge takes on a different perspective. It becomes real, in a way that it hasn't before. What was it about those fish that convinced Peter, as his brother's testimony, as the man in the synagogue and his mother-in-law's healing had not? Was it because he knew about fish, in a way that he did not know about illness and healing? We don't know and we don't need to know. What we know is that suddenly Peter saw that this man, this ordinary looking man, was more than just a rabbi, a teacher. He was one who should be addressed as "Lord" – a title used for God.

And when we know ourselves to be in the presence of God, really know it, not just believe it, then it is not at all uncommon, nor is it unhealthy, to have a sense of our own inadequacy and failures.

I do wonder what Isaiah meant by "unclean lips." Was he given to swearing? And did he hear bad language every day? Or did he mean that he used his lips to do things that were not glorifying to God? Very likely. It is James, who when meditating on how hard it is for us to control our tongues, says that with our tongues we "*bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God.*" (James 3:9) It was certainly his lips and the activities of his mouth which Isaiah thought of when he saw the glory of God. And he felt dirty.

Peter also felt in some way unworthy to be in Jesus' company. We don't know and we don't need to know what sins he was thinking of, whether in his personal or professional life. We don't know if he was thinking about his character – he was a speak-first, think later sort of person and that sort can cause hurt to others, without meaning to. It may be failures in keeping the law which he had in mind. It doesn't matter: his reaction was to send Jesus away because he was unworthy.

In my training to be a minister I spent six months working part time as a trainee chaplain in one of Chicago's big hospitals. It was an interesting time. One of the things we trainees had to do was to get together weekly and explore with each other and our mentors what experiences we had had, how we had coped or reacted and what it meant for our future ministry. I remember in that group one day someone said something about feeling humbled and unworthy because of an encounter with a patient. Quite a few of the group were very unhappy with such language. We should not feel unworthy, they said. They were speaking from a psycho-therapeutic point of view. Maybe in general it is not good for us to feel unworthy. But I think it is very good for us to feel unworthy from time to time when we come before God.

When in prayer I tell God of my sins and shortcomings – as we do together at the start of most of our worship services – I am saying that I am unworthy. I am not worth him bothering about. And if that were the end of the story, that would be a very sad thing. If I were to say “I am not worth God bothering about, so I won't bother God any more,” that would be tragic. But it is very good for me know my own unworthiness if I also know, know beyond a shadow of a doubt, that God does bother with me. God has sent his Son to die for me to save me, to change me, to redeem me. Wow! I could not appreciate all that half so much if I did not have some idea of my own unworthiness before him. And I think that everyone who has had any sort of experience of God, however fleeting, knows this, just as Peter, just as Isaiah knew it. God is God and we are us and there is a great gulf between us, morally and in every other way. Jesus bridges the gulf, but still it is good that at least sometimes we are aware that it is there in the first place.

Both Isaiah and Peter were shown how much God differed from them in their own reactions when instead of being blasted away, which was what Isaiah expected, instead of Jesus turning and leaving without a backward glance, as Peter requested, they were called to follow and given work in God's service to do. And it wasn't a case of God saying “Well, you are pretty useless and filthy with sin, but I guess I could use you as a slave.” No, far from it. It was God saying “I have made you and I have made you pure. Now find the purpose for which you were created as you follow in my service.”

Neither of them knew what that would mean for them. The details of Isaiah's career are a bit sketchy, but we know that for Peter it would take him far from his lake-side and fish he knew so well. But we know it with hindsight. He could not know what it would mean when he left everything that day to follow Jesus, and we cannot know what it will mean for us from day to day. We cannot know what challenges it will bring us, what suffering at times, perhaps. We cannot know what adventures, of body or in our inner lives we will encounter. We cannot know how we will be changed, from glory into glory, as the hymn writer says.

This Lenten time is a time when we are encouraged to do something to help us spend time with God, to be with him, in his presence, to know him, and to learn to follow Jesus

better. If in doing this you are filled with a sense of your lack of worth, do not panic. God loves you and has saved you, and it is when you know that all you can offer in his service is what he has already given you that you are ready, like Peter, to step out and follow. Amen.

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