

FAITH

There's a wonderful story of a tightrope walker,

who was challenged to walk the tightrope

across the Grand Canyon. Everything was in place.

There were huge steel struts on either side of the canyon

to hold the tightrope, and a strong, steel tightrope.

There were television cameras, reporters, a massive crowd.

But there was no safety net.

The tightrope walker appeared with a wheelbarrow,

which he'd decided to push in front of him across the rope.

The crowd cheered him on, although some begged him

not to make this foolish attempt.

One voice in the crowd was more vociferous than the rest:

"Go on, you can do it, I know you can."

"Don't listen to these pessimists. I have complete faith in you."

The tightrope walker turned to the speaker : ***"You have faith in me?"***

"You're certain? You know I can do it?"

The speaker emerged from the crowd and nodded.

"I'm absolutely certain. I have no doubts at all. You can do it!"

"OK," said the tightrope walker. ***"Hop into my wheelbarrow.***

I'll wheel you across!"

Needless to say, the speaker very quickly melted away.

There seems to be a difference between faith and belief.

Faith involves belief but is more than that.

Faith involves putting your money where your mouth is.

Faith means both believing and acting on that belief.

It's interesting that Luke uses the story of the miraculous catch of fish to introduce the call of the first disciples.

Matthew and Mark both describe Jesus calling the fishermen,
but neither of them uses this story
of the miraculous catch of fish.

In fact, neither of them uses this story at all in their gospels.

But John, who writes so very differently from the other three, uses it.

John uses the story not at the beginning of Jesus' ministry,
but at the end, as the very last resurrection story.

And he uses it not to introduce the call of Simon Peter
as Luke does, but to introduce the affirmation
of Simon Peter by Jesus,
after Peter has denied Jesus those three times.

So, it seems two different writers use the same story
for two different purposes.

When Luke uses the story at the beginning of Jesus' ministry,
he uses it to illustrate how it encouraged Simon Peter
to believe in Jesus, to respond to the call.

But as the gospel story unfolds, we, the readers,
begin to realize that although Peter believes,
his faith isn't particularly deep.

He's not prepared to climb into the wheelbarrow.

When John uses the story at the end of Jesus' ministry,
he uses it to illustrate Peter's leap to faith in the risen Lord.

At the beginning Peter believed, but then he fell short.

It was only after he was forgiven and restored by Jesus,
that he found a much deeper and stronger faith.

Then, he was ready for the wheelbarrow.

What is it about this particular story, that it should be used
twice in such wildly different circumstances?

What's so special about it?

In Luke's version, Jesus is with Peter in the boat.

Apparently, Jesus already knew Peter, for Jesus has used
Peter's boat to push out a little way from the shore,
and so, create a natural arena in which to address the people.
Sound carries well over water.

When he finished speaking to the crowd, Jesus told Peter
to sail into deeper water for a catch. Peter protested.

He knew it was a waste of time; the fish simply weren't there.

He and his friends had spent all night trawling the waters,
but to no avail.

Nonetheless, he followed Jesus' suggestion.

He went deeper and threw the nets over the side.

And that small shift in position and timing made all the difference.

The nets were filled to overflowing. So much so,

that the other boat had to be summoned

to help transport the catch, and even then,

the boats began to sink, there were so many fish.

Jesus used the fish as a kind of parable, as an illustration of the way

in which God will be able to use the lives of the fishermen,

but other than that, Jesus wasn't particularly concerned with

the huge catch of fish.

He didn't say: ***"Make sure you give 10% to the poor."***

Or, ***"That's enough to set you up in a nice little business."***

Invest it wisely. Don't waste what I've done for you."

He didn't even mention the catch. It's a gift with no strings attached.

Jesus gave the disciples the means to realize

this huge catch of fish.

It's completely up to the disciples how they use that gift.

But what's the importance of the fish? Why a huge catch of fish, rather than a huge harvest of olives, or a huge flock of sheep?

Fish is very symbolic in the NT, and it was symbolic in the OT too.

In the plagues of Egypt, back in the time of the Exodus, all the fish in the Nile died, so the fish became symbolic of death (Ex. 7:21). Later, in the time of Second Isaiah, the fish symbolized death from drought (Is. 50:2).

And Koheleth, the writer of Ecclesiastes, uses the fish to symbolize premature or untimely death (Ecc. 9:12).

But the fish, once a symbol of death, became for Christians a symbol of life. The acrostic derived from the Greek letters of the word **"fish"** (ichthys) were understood by Christians to stand for the Greek words for: Jesus (i), Christ (ch), God's (th), Son (y), Savior (s).

The use of the symbol of the fish persists to this day as a kind of badge for Christians.

It symbolizes faith in Jesus, and has become quite widespread over recent years.

Peter was so astonished at the catch,
that he immediately threw in his lot with Jesus.

He left everything to follow Jesus.

But he didn't immediately become a fisher of men.

He spent three years in intimate company with Jesus,
and at the end of that time was so bewildered
and uncertain and afraid,
that far from catching other people for Jesus,
he denied he'd ever met him.

The catch in terms of people, didn't begin to be realized until after the death of Jesus.

And it wasn't until Peter and the other disciples were able to follow the instructions given on this very early occasion, that they began to catch people.

Before they could catch anyone,

their faith had to become much deeper.

They had to move out of the safe waters,
huddled together behind locked doors,
and into the dangerous depths, into the midst of real life
with real people and real, frightening emotions and situations.

Then they didn't have to do anything themselves to catch people.

All they had to do was to let down the nets. Jesus saw to the catch.

It was Jesus who made sure the nets were filled.

The disciples simply had to haul them in.

Like the persistence of that early Christian symbol of the fish,
nothing much has changed.

We too are called by Jesus to catch people.

But perhaps not to catch them in order to drag them
back into the safe waters of the church.

If we want to catch people, we need to leave the safety
of these waters behind. We need push out into the deep
and dangerous waters of real life,
where real people are to be found.

Sometimes we have to be prepared to do things which seem stupid,
perhaps because we tried that last year, and it didn't work.

Sometimes Jesus calls us to a small shift of position or timing
before we let down our nets.

Once the timing is right, is God's timing rather than our own timing,
all we have to do is let down the nets. In other words,
we simply need to be ourselves. To be honest, loving, accepting,
non-judgmental, Christians. Jesus will fill the nets!

You catch them, He'll clean them!

And to pull the nets in, we must work together, in community,
working at the right way to nurture the **'fish'** that have been netted.

The disciples had to use their initiative to haul in the nets.

They had to call in another boat and more people to help.

Otherwise, the nets would have broken, and the fish been lost.

Just as he called the first disciples, so Jesus calls us.

He calls us not only to follow him, but to become fishers of people
for him. And to do that, we have to sail out into the deep

and let down our nets. It's a scary and risky thing to do.

In effect, it's getting into the wheelbarrow for Jesus. Amen.