

## **Jesus and the apostles**

### **The Call of the Fishermen**

John 1:35-51, Matthew 4:18-22, Mark 1:16-20, Luke 5:1-11

The story of the call of the first four disciples, the Galilean fishermen Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John, starts with John the Baptist, as we have seen in the chapter on Jesus and John the Baptist. John was at Bethany beside the River Jordan [\*1], as usual baptising the crowds who came to him. In addition to the crowds who followed John, he had a number of closer disciples. These included Andrew, and probably also Simon Peter, Philip and Nathanael [\*2].

After John had baptised Jesus he was standing one day with Andrew and another of his disciples when Jesus passed by. John pointed out Jesus to the two disciples and said: "That man is the Lamb of God." Andrew and the other disciple went off with Jesus and spent the rest of the day with him.

The timing is a bit uncertain [\*3] but the most obvious way of understanding it is that at about four o'clock in the afternoon Andrew went off, found his brother Simon Peter and brought him to Jesus. Andrew was by now convinced that Jesus was the expected Messiah and told Simon so.

The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Though not specifically stated the impression is given that Andrew, Simon, Philip and Nathanael all went with him leaving John the Baptist behind in Bethany.

Philip is most likely identified with the Philip who became one of the twelve apostles (Mark 3:16-19). Some people guess that Nathanael is the same as Bartholomew [\*4]. Otherwise Nathanael is not mentioned again. We do not know what their jobs were.

Our attention next turns to the fishermen, Andrew, Simon, James and John. [Matthew 4:18-22, Mark 1:16-20]

Jesus was walking along the shore of the Lake of Galilee when he saw Simon and Andrew throwing their nets in the lake. These were a particular type of net called a "casting-net" which is still in use in some parts of the Middle East. I have seen it used on the White Nile at a dam called the Jebel Aulia Dam. The net itself is circular, maybe four metres across, with weights around the edge. The centre of the net is attached to a rope. It is wrapped up in a special way and thrown out into the water. In the water the edges are brought together by the weights and any fish are trapped inside. It is a slow and rather inefficient way of catching fish, but it does not require a boat, and so is cheaper. We know from elsewhere that Simon and Andrew did in fact also have boats, and they could have thrown their "casting-nets" from their boats.

Jesus said to them: "Come with me and I will lead you to catch men, not fish." They immediately left their nets and followed Jesus.

A little further on he saw James and John, the sons of Zebedee. They were in a boat with their father cleaning the nets. Jesus called them as well and they left the boat and followed him.

This is a very simple story of how Jesus gathered together his first four disciples. There was no theology about anything that day. But how much did they understand? Simon and Andrew had been disciples of John the Baptist so they were clearly in agreement with his teaching about sin and repentance in its social context of how people were to behave towards each other, with special reference to their positions of employment. Then John the Baptist had told them that Jesus was the "Lamb of God" and probably also that he was the "Messiah". They had already shown their willingness to leave home to follow

John, so following Jesus would not have been a problem for them. This is also something that Jesus would have taken into account in choosing them.

Luke [in Luke 5:1-11] tells a story which is rather different in its details. Some people regard it as a different occasion and others regard it as the same occasion. I will treat it as the same occasion for three reasons. First because there is considerable similarity in the main points of the story and secondly because if there were two separate incidents it would be difficult to explain what had happened between them. Finally if we look at the reports of any two modern newspapers describing the same events, would we find the reports any closer than those of Matthew and Mark on the one hand and Luke on the other? I think not. [\*5] Whatever the case, let us now look at Luke's report.

The picture of the fishermen is largely the same. Most fishing takes place at night. So here we are in the morning with the fishermen cleaning their nets before going home to rest. The main fishing would have been done from the boats during the night with the normal nets, but Matthew and Mark have some of them making one last attempt to catch fish with the inefficient casting-nets.

In Luke the picture of Jesus is different. In Matthew and Mark, Jesus is walking beside the lake. In Luke he is teaching a crowd of people. But is there really much difference? Supposing a modern eyewitness to an accident was quoted in a modern newspaper. One might say that he was walking along the road where the accident happened. The other might say that he was a postman making his first delivery of letters for the day in the street when the accident happened in that street.

Jesus got into Simon's boat and continued to teach the crowd with the boat bobbing about in the lake. By keeping the people from crowding right up to him he made it easier for his voice to reach the people further back. Also if the shoreline had a good slope at that point it would have formed a natural auditorium with the people further back looking over heads of those in front of them.

When Jesus had finished teaching he told Simon to go into deeper water and let out the nets. Simon was not very hopeful. He said that they had worked all night and caught nothing, but if Jesus said so he would do so. At this point Simon is showing the special regard in which he held Jesus. Luke has already told the story that Jesus healed Simon's mother-in-law. If this did indeed take place before this event, Simon would have had a very special reason for doing what Jesus told him to do.

So Simon let down the nets into the lake and made a big catch of fish. They summoned their fellow fishermen [\*6] in the other boat to come and help them and both boats were filled till they nearly sank.

Simon reacted in amazement and awareness of his own shortcoming. He wanted Jesus to leave him, to go away. How could he cope with the challenge of being with Jesus and the continuous awareness of his own failure? No. This was more than he could bear. But Jesus reassured him. "Don't be afraid," he said. And then he added his call to Simon to follow him: "From now on you will capture men." [\*7]

They all pulled their boats up onto the shore, left them there and went off with Jesus.

What a journey it was to be! They could scarcely have guessed the half of it! It took them all over Galilee, Samaria and Judea and for some of them beyond. They left behind their assured source of income to face uncertainty. Peter was eventually crucified upside down in Rome [\*8]. Andrew was said to have gone to Scythia, the land of an ancient tribe living to the north who originated in Siberia and were notorious as fierce warriors [\*9]. James was put to death on the orders of Herod Agrippa I [Acts 12:1-2]. John became the writer of the gospel and is said to have lived much of his long life and died in Ephesus [\*10].

*I became a Christian in 1962 while a student studying physics at university. In my own little way, certainly not to be compared with the apostles, it has meant an enormous change in life. I later studied theology, went overseas as a missionary, worked overseas in a variety of secular jobs, and am currently working as a translator in a little village in Cornwall. More than these external changes I have had to change in many other ways.*

But to return to the four fishermen. Why did Jesus choose them and not some of the more educated people about, such as the religious leaders, the rabbis? We have already seen that two of the four, Simon and Andrew, had been disciples of John the Baptist. Their lack of education did not mean that they were unintelligent, especially as educational opportunities were few in those days, and largely restricted to religious education. The problem with education is that it can close a person's mind to new ideas, just as much as it can open their mind. Persuading scientists and many other professional people to accept something new is a notoriously difficult problem! Jesus wanted "new skins for new wine". This is why he did not choose any rabbis to be among the apostles, even if they had been willing to join him. Besides the fishermen and others Jesus chose to be his disciples were mostly closely related to the ordinary people, whereas the rabbis had become a class apart.

We should also consider the social status of both Jesus and fishermen. In traditional settled Middle Eastern societies land ownership is the key to social status. Among nomads it is the ownership of camels and other herds. People like carpenters, fishermen, ferry-boatmen and other tradesmen living in the villages were not farmers owning land. Hence they were among the lower social classes. This included Jesus and his first four disciples. James and John may have achieved some social status from the fact that their father, Zebedee, was an employer with employees [Mark 1:20]. Tradesmen were probably however to be ranked above the landless day-labourers who appear in Jesus's parables.

There are some detailed points worthy of note in this story:

\*1: Bethany [John 1:28]. The location of this village called Bethany is not known. Some ancient manuscripts read "Bethabara" and this is supported by the ancient Christian writer Origen. Place names are easily misread by copyists dealing with hand-written documents. It is a problem I face all the time as a translator.

\*2: John, the gospel writer, certainly tells us that Andrew was one of John the Baptist's disciples [John 1:40]. The presence of the others, Simon Peter, Philip and Nathaniel, in the same place as John the Baptist, away from their home village of Bethsaida, strongly suggests that they too were among John's disciples.

\*3: John, the gospel writer, appears to count time in hours from sunrise with twelve hours between sunrise and sunset [see John 11:9]. Here he fixes the time as the "tenth" hour. Other times mentioned in the gospel are the "sixth" hour when Jesus arrived at the well in Samaria [John 4:6] and the "sixth" hour when Jesus was brought to Pilate. On this reckoning the "tenth" hour becomes four o'clock in the afternoon. Modern translations make this conversion to four o'clock whereas the older translations translate literally as the "tenth" hour.

\*4. This is because Bartholomew means "Son of Tholomew" in Aramaic, the language of the people in Jesus's day. Tholomew was his father's name. It is common in the Middle East today for people to be known as "Son of so and so". I was often called "Son of Gordon" in the Middle East. People thought "Gordon" was my father's name. This person then was known as "Son of Tholomew", but we do not know his own name. Because Bartholomew comes next to Philip in the list of the apostles, it is thought that his own name may have been Nathanael.

\*5 Questions like this are always complicated. On the one hand there are people who stand on their heads and perform all sorts of mental contortions to convince us that there are no differences, because to admit differences is to open the door to the possibility that the gospel writers are inaccurate and therefore unreliable and not to be trusted about anything. They are indeed right to

be afraid of this, because many have taken this path to the point where they believe almost nothing the gospels record. But this does not mean that some of their attempts to “prove” that different versions are both exactly compatible are reasonable. On the other hand there are people who seem determined to find contradictions where there really are none. Perhaps a good starting point for any discussion of this matter is to ask whether the differences are greater than would be found in two reports by honest modern newspaper reporters.

\*6. The word for which I have used “fellow fishermen” means in general “partners, companions, accomplices”. The translation “partners” used in some versions might be taken to suggest there was a formal business partnership between them with agreed shares in the proceeds of the catches they took. While this is not uncommon in an industry such as fishing, even when on such a simple scale, the Greek word does not prove it here.

\*7. The word used for “capture” was particularly used in the sense of capture alive in battle rather than kill. Whereas Matthew and Mark used what was perhaps the original image of fishing for men that Jesus used, Luke has avoided the image and used a straightforward word meaning “capture”. He may have felt this to be more suited to his readers. As a translator I often have to consider which word of several might be more appropriate for the intended readers.

\*8. Peter’s death by crucifixion is recorded by the early historian of Christianity Eusebius in his book “Ecclesiastical History”, Book II, Section 25; Book III, Section 1. [Loeb Classical Library, Volume 1, Pages 179 and 191.]

\*9 Eusebius, “Ecclesiastical History”, Book III, Section 1. [Loeb Classical Library, Volume 1, Page 191.]

\*10. Also Eusebius, “Ecclesiastical History”, Book III, Section 1. [Loeb Classical Library, Volume 1, Page 191.]

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