



If You Say So
Isaiah 6:1-13; Luke 5:1-11
Reverend Giuseppe Mattei (February 6, 2022)

In April 2010 fishing was banned in the Sea of Galilee for two years.¹ This was the first time in 5,000 years the Sea did not provide fish for the local population. Fishing stocks had diminished due to overfishing and a virus had infected the most important fish, a species of tilapia known locally as St. Peter's fish. In 2013 one million healthy tilapias were released into the Sea to try to revive the species and the waters, as the fish feeds on a toxic weed that grows in the Sea.

The Sea of Galilee (aka Lake of Gennesaret or of Tiberias) is the lowest freshwater lake in the world at about 700 ft below sea level. Since biblical times the lake has been an important source of protein for the surrounding land and beyond.

The fishing industry in Israel was fully under the control of the Roman Empire. Caesar owned every body of water, and all fishing was state regulated. Fishermen couldn't obtain licenses to fish without joining a syndicate,² most of what they caught was exported — leaving local communities impoverished and hungry — and the Romans collected exorbitant taxes, levies, and tolls each time fish were sold. To catch even one fish outside of this exploitative system was considered illegal.

The fishermen used nets made of flax or linen. Most fishing was done at night so that fish would not see and swim around the nets. Sailing or rowing to the fishing spot, the fishermen quietly lowered their net into the water so that it formed a wide curve with the open side facing the shore. Lead at the foot of the net would pull it to the bottom of the lake while floating cork at the top would stretch the net upright like a wall. The boat was maneuvered into the area between the net and the shore; then the fishermen would make noise by hitting the water with their oars or stumping on the bottom of the boat to scare the fish into the net.³ This would be done seven or eight times during the night and by morning the fishermen could bring in a half ton of fish.⁴

A good catch was not the end of the story. During the day the men were busy, no matter how tired, wet, and hungry they might be. The caught fish had to be sorted for sale, the nets had to be washed in the lake to remove any silt, and tears in the nets had to be mended. The nets were then hung out to dry and folded for the next catch. If not done properly and promptly, the nets would rot. There may be good humor and great hopes of a good pay for the night work if there were a catch. In a frustratingly unproductive night, there might even be short tempers during the routine chores still to be done in preparation for the next fishing trip.

¹ [BBC News - Fishing banned on the Sea of Galilee](#)

² The ancient Jewish historian Josephus states that there were more than 230 fishing boats working the Sea during that period.

³ [TRAMMEL NETS \(eurocbc.org\)](#)

⁴ [Issue24.pdf \(netdna-ssl.com\)](#)

This particular morning, Peter and his companions have caught nothing. Peter is probably exhausted, hungry, humbled, and disappointed...and Jesus steps into his boat, requesting him to put out some. "Good timing, Jesus." Peter must have thought. But he obliges. After all, Jesus has just cured his mother-in-law a day or so ago (Lk 4:38-39). How can he refuse?

I can see Peter, astonished and confused, getting up and accommodating the Teacher and miracle worker from the nearby town of Nazareth. Probably, he must have thought Jesus didn't know how tiring fishing was and how upsetting it was having worked all night and having nothing to show for it.

Once Jesus finishes talking to the crowds from the boat, he turns to Peter and commands him to "[p]ut out into the deep water and let down [the] nets for a catch." (v.4) There is some resistance from Peter. Actually, he shows much restraint and deference towards the naïve Teacher. I wonder if the thought went through his mind that by asking him to fish in plain daylight, Jesus understood absolutely nothing about fishing.

Peter tries to explain they have been working hard the whole night long with no results. What he implies here is that this is surely a waste of time and energy, both of which he doesn't have much of at the moment. But what he has he uses: patience and obedience. So, Peter follows his weak resistance with a striking demonstration of trust: "Yet if *you* say so, I will let down the nets."

Peter shows trust in Jesus based on the little he knows about him. And what he knows is that Jesus was there for his family. So, Peter's trust is generated from gratitude. Doing what Jesus requests is more than a desire to accommodate the miracle worker with no clue about fishing.

Peter trusts Jesus' *word*. It's on his word that he is ready to cast the net. This is the beginning of Peter's journey of faith. Jesus has cured his mother-in-law, could it be that he is capable of yet another miracle even though the odds are against him? Could it be that even nature obeys his word? The experience of God-*for-us* builds our trust and opens our heart to greater possibilities.

I like Peter's response. I borrowed his words many a times with resignation in my heart when I found myself beaten and weary, holding myself up by the strap of my trust in God's promises. In those moments, faith is the only thing that sustains me, and obedience is the virtue that carries me when I've lost all enthusiasm and motivation. And yet, the Lord trusts me to the point of asking again and again. And when I am tired and don't see the point of going any further, he asks for more.

And so, I whisper until my heart agrees: Yet if you say so, I will try again. Yet if you say so, I will be faithful to my vocation. Yet if you say so, I will go deep rather than remain in the shallows. Yet if you say so, I will trust that your presence in the boat is more precious than any guarantee of success. Yet if you say so, I will cast my empty net into the water, and look with hope for your kingdom to come.

So, Peter, tired and hungry, shares the last drop of energy, invests his time in what seems to be a lost cause, and puts his skill at Jesus' service. His passion for fishing is his vocation and God's gift to him, why not put it at God's service even if at the moment it doesn't make sense to him?

The result of Peter's obedience is startling: even with the help of his companions from the other boat, they had a hard time carrying the abundant catch to shore and the boats were about to sink. With this catch, they were more than compensated for their strenuous work, for their availability

to help the teacher in need, and for their show of obedience in someone who, in their professional opinion, didn't know anything about fishing.

This is when we hear Peter's confession in the gospel of Luke:⁵ fallen on his knees, Peter humbly acknowledges his sinfulness and Jesus' holiness: "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" Peter is aware of his unworthiness: how can he even begin to entertain the thought of remaining in Jesus' presence? Peter speaks for all of us when we stop and take an honest look at our soul and shake our head. How is it possible that I stand in your presence, Lord Jesus?

In his wisdom, Jesus finds in Peter's honesty an opening for a challenge to something more: he won't be catching fish to sell any more; he'll be fishing for people. Jesus acknowledges Peter's fear and yet he calls forth Peter's truest vocation: spending his life in service to God.

What we see is something extraordinary: Jesus *trusts* Peter with an important mission. He knows he is asking much of Peter: "I trust you. What are you willing to shed?" In a trust relationship there is always something to lose, to let go of. "Are you willing to enter a trust relationship with Jesus?" That question is valid for you and for me today. Even if we answered that question long time ago, are we still on board with it? Do we still perceive the radical commitment that Jesus is asking of us? Are we still ready to follow him all the way to Golgotha through rejection and scorn?

There are times when the future does not look very bright. In fact, it looks like the whole world has entered a very dark age. Disrespect for human life, escalation of hate and violence, disregard for democratic values, and power grabs are on the rise around the world. But where else do we want to live if not in the light of Christ? How else do we plan to live like Jesus and catch people for God if we do not stand for those who are constantly being thrown under the bus?

Just like Peter's, my heart swells with gratitude and joy when I see and hear the abundance that the Lord's presence has caused in all of you who trust the Word and respond with gratitude and generosity of heart. And so I continue to trust the one who has invested so much in this relationship, Jesus my Lord.

May the Word of God strengthen our faith for generous service and righteous living. Amen.

⁵ The other Synoptics report Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi (Mt 16:13-16; Mk 8:27-29). In John, Peter's confession is reported at 6:66-69 and is in reply to the defection of "many".