

You can make me whole again

Intro:

Can you remember how you felt when you first became a Christian? For me it was the first time I felt complete. It was like putting the last piece in a jigsaw and being able to see the whole picture for the first time. And it was exciting. I was bursting with love for Jesus and couldn't wait to get stuck into a new life with him, serving him and doing his will. Maybe it was something like that for you too.

Going off the boil:

But we've all been Christians long enough now to know that it doesn't stay that way all the time. If you're preparing a meal perhaps you've had to bring something to a boil, and for a little while it's furiously bubbling away and the pan can barely contain it. But then the heat gets turned down and it subsides, and there's just the occasional bubble gently rising. Maybe you even turn off the heat altogether and it slowly cools down and even goes cold.

Our walk as Christians can be like that too as the twists and turns, or the trials and tribulations, of life take hold. We still love Jesus, but serving him has to be balanced with family commitments, and jobs, and all the other business of daily life, and perhaps that love is more of a gentle simmer than the fast boil it once was.

For the disciples in our reading this was just such a time. For three years they'd been with Jesus day and night, listened to his teaching, seen him perform miracles, even seen him come back from the dead. And now there was... nothing. It was like that feeling you have when you come off some big, thrilling ride at the funfair or amusement park. The adrenaline has been flowing and you've been on a high, but then it comes to an end, you come back to the ground and everything seems flat and empty.

For the disciples that feeling must have been magnified a hundred times. Perhaps they thought that with Jesus they could go out and change the world, but now he was gone, they were alone, and they didn't know what to do. They had yet to receive the radical, transforming power of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and were at perhaps the biggest loose end ever. The big question might have been, "What do we do now?", but it seemed like no-one had an answer to it.

Old familiar ways:

It was against that background that Peter, who was always a man of action and for whom doing nothing didn't come easy, decided enough was enough, so he said, "I'm going fishing", and the disciples who were with him were quick to say, "We'll come too!" (v3).

It's hard to be sure exactly what was in their minds at that moment. Maybe they really thought it was all over and it was time to just go back to their old lives. Most of them had been fishermen before, they could do it again, it wasn't such a bad life. But I'm not so sure they had anything so final in mind.

There's a line in a Paul Simon song, *Still Crazy After All These Years*, that seems fitting to me. It says, "I seem to lean on old familiar ways", and I think that's what Peter and the others were doing. When times are troubled and uncertain (as they are now with the Covid-19 pandemic seeming to be into its "second wave") there is great comfort to be had in falling back on familiar things and routines. It helps us to impose some sense of order where there is none and to find peace.

I don't think Peter was ready to give up on following Jesus yet, but he wasn't sure what to do next and sitting thinking wasn't his way, so in the meantime he might just as well do what he knew best. Surely it was better than doing nothing!

I'm sure for a time it must have felt good. Muscle memory would have kicked in as they went through familiar motions casting the net, and they had, for the first time in a while, a clear and immediate purpose. I can imagine them exchanging happy smiles as, for the moment at least, all their uncertainty faded away.

Standing at the crossroads:

But that happiness didn't last. They laboured all through the night, but they "caught nothing" (v3). I'm sure that by the time day began to dawn they must have been discouraged and dispirited and feeling like they couldn't do anything right. Jesus wasn't with them any more, and now even fishing wasn't working for them.

Another song comes to mind at this point, Eric Clapton's *Let it Grow*. It speaks of, "Standing at the crossroads, trying to read the signs, to tell me which way I should go to find the answer", which is just what Peter was doing. But if he thought he could find the answer by going fishing, his plan had failed!

Then a man on the shore, who they didn't yet recognise. called out a friendly greeting and asked if they'd caught anything (v5). When the reply was "No" he told them to cast their net again, on the right side of the boat (v6). It would have been natural for them to be sceptical, even angry. They'd been fishermen most of their lives, and some random stranger was trying to tell them how to fish... the phrase "teach your grandmother to suck eggs" comes to mind! But, either in desperation or resignation after a long night of hard work with nothing to show for it, they do as he suggests, and this time "they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish" (v6). I like the little detail, which adds a touch of authenticity to the tale, that when they counted them later there were 153 of them (v11).

What changed? Why, after working all night and achieving nothing, was their net suddenly so full? I am reminded of *Psalms 127:1*, "Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labour in vain." There was no doubting their commitment or skill as fishermen, but they had come up empty-handed because it wasn't what the LORD had told them to do. Only when they listened to him and *did as he told them* were their efforts blessed with success.

I remember a time quite some years ago when the LORD gave me this same passage. I'm sure you know of Gilven House, a hostel for homeless girls in Pitcoudie, run by Scottish Christian Alliance. I was the chairman of its management committee and we were facing a crisis. SCA had separated from a parent body in England and there was a dispute over ownership of Gilven House. London wanted Scotland to pay them the full market value of the property, and things, sadly, were growing increasingly rancorous with both parties taking entrenched positions. I talked it through with the local committee and then, with their full support, told the national committee that we were willing to walk away and let London have the house rather than go on fighting for it, trusting that God would instead bless us in some new way or in new premises. In the end things were peacefully resolved, but I believe it was kind of like Abraham being willing to sacrifice Isaac in *Genesis 22* and our willingness to do something different, rather than cling to what we had, opened up the way forward.

Whole again:

It was when their net filled up that the disciples realised the man on the shore was Jesus (v7), and Peter rushed ashore to meet him. By the time the others landed, Jesus already had a fire going and was cooking fish (v9). It's worth noting that, though he told them to bring their catch ashore, he didn't need their fish. He was already cooking... what he needed was *to know that they were still ready to listen to him and obey him.*

I'm sure in those moments Peter's mind would have gone right back to when he first met Jesus. Luke's account of that meeting in *Luke 5:1-11* tells us of a similarly large catch after a night of fruitless labour, and I've no doubt that Jesus deliberately echoed those events now in order that Peter might recall, and relive, Jesus' words to him then, that from then on *he would fish for people.*

Just as sometimes a recipe might call for a pan to be brought back to the boil, Jesus knew the disciples had to be brought back to the boil. Their love for him and their vigour in doing his will had to be restored.

Yet another song comes to mind, this time from Atomic Kitten (I'm nothing if not eclectic in my musical taste!). The chorus of their song *Whole Again* says:

Looking back on when we first met
I cannot escape and I cannot forget
Baby, you're the one
You still turn me on
You can make me whole again

I'm sure that even as Peter remembered first meeting Jesus, his calling to follow him and his sense of purpose would have come flooding back to him. He was, in that moment, *made whole again*, ready to begin the next chapter in serving Jesus, whatever it might involve and wherever it might take him.

Conclusion:

What of us? Have we gone off the boil? Are we standing at a crossroads in our lives, going through familiar motions and seeing no reward for our efforts, yet not sure what to do next?

Perhaps we need to pause and listen to him, then cast our nets on the other side so that he can make us whole again and prepare us for something new and exciting!