

In The Shoes of a Fisherman¹

(Preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist Church February 9th, 2025 – Luke 5:1-11)

I know nothing else, I have been doing it all my life, since I could make a net, and thread a worm onto my hook on my fishing rod. My father was a fisherman and his father before him. It's all I ever wanted to do; all I learnt to do. In the early days I would go out in the boat with my father, until he got too old to deal with it, then I took over the business. As time went on, I got some partners in the business, my friends James and John. They too had come from a fishing family.

Now this fishing caper can be hard work, sometimes you have to deal with too many fish, other times too few. Then when the nets break you need to mend them. You have to figure out the tides, we don't go too far from shore – would need a bigger and stronger boat and maybe I would need to learn to be a better swimmer. The winds can get pretty strong too, making it a bit choppy out there. We normally watch the tides and wait for the fish to come in with them, and that's when we cast our nets and wait and see what we can get.

I like the work. You are out at night usually when all is still (unless there is a storm brewing). You need a fair bit of patience to wait and wait, but I like that – gives me time to think. And I like the silence. It can be cold, so you need to rug up. It is hard though when you don't catch much and have nothing to take back to the family and have nothing to sell to make a bit of income. Anyway, I know nothing else.

We had been out all night and nothing, not one bite on the rod and nothing in the nets. Was just packing up and washing the nets ready for the next night when we would try our luck again.

Then this bloke comes along and hops into my boat and asks me to push him out a little from the shore. I then realised it was Jesus, I had met him before, he had come to the house once when my mother in law was ill, and he had made her feel much better, she was able to go about her normal activities again. This young bloke from Nazareth had been making a bit of a name for himself, teaching, healing, challenging people. And the crowds were gathering too. Guess that is why he wanted to get into the boat, get a bit of space from the crowd who seem to be getting closer and closer to him. Anyway, he spent some time teaching them, I even listened in a bit – talking about love, compassion and peace, about loving God and loving our neighbours too. Then he begins speaking to me, tells me to go out a bit deeper in the water for a catch of fish.

Who is he kidding, we'd been at it all night and caught nothing. What to do – tell him he is crazy, humour him and go or trust that he might know something. Maybe the tide is coming in? I told him about our lack of success the previous night, but that I was prepared to give it a go if he reckoned, we might get lucky. Wasn't really expecting to get anything, but as soon as I let down the nets they filled with fish, so many fish. I needed help, so I called James and John to bring out their boat and help me with the haul. Amazing, who was this Jesus? Clearly, he was a man with special abilities, there was something different about him, something I couldn't ignore. I fell to my knees in gratitude, I called him Lord and I didn't really feel worthy and told him to go and leave me alone. I really didn't know how to deal with it all, that's why I asked Jesus to be on his way. Guess I was amazed and scared, what would happen next?

¹ With apologies to Morris West for using the title of his book 'The Shoes of the Fisherman' written in 1963,

He certainly knew how to get one's attention. Can't think of a better way to get the attention of an old fisherman – commandeer his boat, suggest he try again for a catch, and then miraculously get a huge haul of fish, and his teaching was impressive too.

This whole encounter was amazing and if I am honest a bit frightening. As if that all wasn't enough, it was what happened next, that is, truly amazing. This man changed my life, really changed my life, in ways I could never have imagined.

After I told him to go away, I just didn't feel good enough to be with him, he spoke again. Don't be afraid' – he says, are you kidding I am a big tough fisherman, as if I am going to admit that he frightened me. Truth is, he did frighten me. I wonder what he meant by that, perhaps he was saying it is okay, you don't need to feel unworthy with me, that I love and accept everyone.

Then he says from now on you will catch people – what does he mean by that? I am intrigued by his announcement, I was intrigued by him himself, there was just something about him.

So, before I knew it and to my families surprise, I up and left everything and followed him along his way. Looking back, I have always been fairly impetuous. When I decide something, I am all in, feet first. Sometimes I act first and think second.

My life following Jesus seems to have followed the same pattern as this day. Jesus did use me to help spread his message of love and acceptance and time and time again I must have disappointed him. but he seemed to pick me up and even forgive me and just tell me to start again.

There was the time he came to us walking on water and I couldn't help myself, and jumped out of the boat and began walking on the water, but I took my focus of Jesus and began to sink. A bit embarrassing as they hurled me back into the boat soaking wet.

Then he got himself into trouble and I was the first to jump to his defence, used my knife to stop the soldiers arresting him, and accidentally cut off one of the soldier's ears. Jesus tended to him straight away, and in the process reminded me, that following him meant acting peacefully not violently.

Not long after that, when he was really in trouble, I denied even knowing him. (He had told me I would do just that). I felt terrible, could barely forgive myself, just wanted the ground to swallow me up. Not long after that, he appeared to me, and strangely said to me three things. He asked me three times if I loved him. Each time I responded of course I did, each time he asked me to do three different things. Feed my lambs, take care of my sheep, feed my sheep. And then he said follow me.

Took me a very long time to understand this encounter. Why did he ask me if I loved him three times – then the penny dropped, I had denied knowing him three times. He was forgiving me.

Eventually I understood the stuff about sheep, it was to continue his work, to do all I could to share his message of love with others.

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I guess I want people to know that Jesus will never abandon you, no matter what you do. Jesus will always forgive you. Jesus will use whatever skills and personal traits you have, to share God's love if you let him. Jesus calls you just as you are, after all he called James, John and myself and let me tell you we were far from perfect.

I hope people down through the ages will learn from my encounters, and my mistakes, and hear the words of Jesus in their lives – don't be afraid and follow me. Jesus will get your attention, and he will never abandon you, no matter what. Amen.