

20 years ago my younger daughter had a near-death experience and said God told her to go back, that he still had some things for her to do. Trying to make sense of it all, she tried reading the Bible in its entirety front to back. But the Bible isn't a novel or a history text or a philosophical treatise that has a logical beginning middle and end. It's a library of books jumbled together in no chronological order, giving little context for understanding what's happening. It takes a lot of effort to relate it to modern times. There are all those laws for how to live in a nomadic tribe in the desert. Then there are all those prophets. Who were they? Who were they talking to? Who were they talking about? How do we apply their message to today? It all needs research, study, guidance, prayer and a proper translation.

A better place for new Christians to start is with the Gospels. But even these need study lest we lose small but exciting details. The gospel stories were first circulated word of mouth in the Aramaic that the people of Israel spoke. These stories of Jesus, what he did and what he said, were in a language none of us speaks today. When the stories were first put down on paper and circulated, they had to be translated into Greek, the dominant language of the fledgling church, and in that translating we lose some of the personal details. Then translating the Greek into English we not only lose some of the little details, but we lose the nuances found in the Greek but which don't transfer well into English, hence the importance of scholars who study in depth and detail what words meant 2000 years ago, what the context of the words were, so we can understand idioms, turns of phrases, jokes and references we lose in a casual reading in English.

In Luke's gospel we are in Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee. This was Jesus' home, where he lived, plying his trade as a carpenter. This is *his* town. He knows and is known by the local people. He has started to make good friends with some of the local fisherman, including Simon.

He has just begun his ministry of preaching in his local church and being asked to address other neighbouring churches. The local boy is becoming known and respected for the quality of his speaking and the important message he is teaching. Early one morning, trying to escape the crowds that are following him, he goes down to the harbour to watch his friends bring in their boats after a night of fishing.

To get away from the crowd, he gets on Simon's boat and speaks to the people while floating offshore. Simon may have been a little put out, because he'd worked hard all night and achieved nothing; he had no fish to show for his efforts. But then Jesus, the carpenter, tells Simon, the fisherman, to go back out and fish some more! Say, what? Simon was completely exasperated by now, wanting nothing more than to go home and rest. Grudgingly, he obeys. The "Yes, Master" he offers may have been tinged with more than a little sarcasm. The word "Master" here isn't the respectful 'Rabbi' or 'Teacher', but an overlord who gives orders. More like, "Yes, Boss". He may have been grumbling under his breath, but he obeys and is rewarded for his obedience. He and his fishing buddies haul in an impossible catch of fish. Word of Jesus doing strange miraculous things must have filtered down to Simon by now, but these were rumours, stories, things that happened to other people, and were probably exaggerated anyway. But this load of fish was something Simon understood. He knew what had happened was impossible. This wasn't somebody else's crazy story, this actually happened... to him. And the penny drops for Simon; he knows he is in the presence of something extraordinary. The sarcastic "Master" becomes the more respectful, "Lord". Simon is confronted by someone who can see beyond the superficiality of everyday life, someone who confronts the depths of his own personal moral condition, and he is deeply afraid. He is afraid of Jesus and the event. He is fearful of the implications of confronting what Jesus represents. "*Go away! I am a sinful man.*" Simon is brought to his knees from fear of his own unworthiness.

Isaiah had a similar internal confrontation with God, proclaiming, "*There is no hope for me! I am doomed because every word that passes my lips is sinful!*" Like Simon he looks inside and is frightened by his own sense of unworthiness. Paul describes his own personal sense of unworthiness, describing himself as unfit. Three different men, each feeling a deep lack of self-respect.

But Isaiah is touched and told, "*Your guilt is gone, your sins are forgiven,*" and rises saying, "*Lord, here I am, send me to speak for you.*" Paul had his own surreal experience on the Damascus road. He was laid low, made to feel the weight of his sins, but was forgiven and sent out to speak for God.

Like Isaiah and Paul, Simon is lifted up, told, My friend, do not be afraid, do not be paralysed in awe, get over it, accept it, and get to work, I have need of you, I have a purpose for you. Forget the past; that is forgiven and forgotten; from now on... it will be different. No longer will you be catching fish, you will be catching people. Like Isaiah and Paul, Peter is sent out to speak for God, to bring people to an understanding of God that can set aside a sense of unworthiness and personal failure and mistakes and bad decisions. No matter what we feel about ourselves, God knows the truth of our real worth, and can use us no matter who we are, where we are, or what we may have done in the past. Jesus says, Do not be afraid, you are my beloved friend and I can send you to speak for me, just let me into your life that I may heal your wounds, heal your heartaches, forgive whatever you may have done. Look deep, confront yourself, offer it up to God and he will say, From now on... it will be different...

From now on... you and I will be out there together. From now on...