

Sermons at the Anglican Church of Luxembourg
Preached by Evelyn Sweerts on Sunday 10 February 2019
Text: Luke 5.1-11
Year C: 4 before Lent

Who do you trust? How do you know they are trustworthy?

One would hope that most of us trust our friends and family members but the people and institutions of the public square are not doing very well, on the whole.

The financial crisis significantly eroded public trust in business and banking and governments are not faring much better: Only 18% of Americans today say they can trust the government in Washington to do what is right “just about always” or “most of the time”. In the UK, politicians and journalists are trusted by just 1 in 5 people, a statistic no doubt not helped at all by the proliferation of fake news, the creation and destruction of bot accounts and the work of troll armies – and no, we haven’t entered the land of Lord of the Rings but the world of cyber-insecurity.

What about God? Do you trust God?

Trust is the axis on which today’s Gospel turns.

Simon Peter has to trust Jesus when he asks to borrow the boat;
Again when he asks him to fish;
And as the boat begins to sink;
Again when he becomes aware of his own inadequacy and sinfulness;
And finally when he leaves everything to follow Jesus.

It is a journey into ever-deeper levels of trust. And that’s a narrative we find again and again in the Bible.

God says: Abram, leave your country to go to the land I will give to your descendants (I'm sorry God, did you fail to notice *I have no children?*).

Moses, says God, if you wouldn't mind just single-handedly freeing my people from the Pharaoh that would be really helpful (You're kidding, aren't you God? I could never do that and besides which I don't have a way with words – send someone else!).

David, says God, you are the king of Israel and so will your sons be after you (I'm sorry God, you do know *I am running for my life and have been for years?*).

Mary, you're going to have a baby (Excuse me, God, but you do realise that I'm *unmarried?*)

Peter, says Jesus, put down your nets (But we've been fishing all night *when you're supposed to fish* and caught nothing!).

I wonder whether you identify with Peter, and if so, at what point in the story?

When he's asked to fish?

When he's overwhelmed by his own inadequacy?

When he puts down his nets and follows Jesus?

I think each of us can usefully ask ourselves: what is Jesus asking of me at this time? Is it a small thing (can I borrow your boat?) or a big thing (come, leave everything you have and follow me), or something in between?

How are we responding to him in this season of our lives? Whole-heartedly?

Cautiously? Fingers in ears na na na I can't hear you?

This passage is a vignette, necessarily condensed. But it could be an extended meditation on discipleship and trust.

Peter does not have the same level of trust throughout this encounter and I imagine that's true for most of us. Our ability to trust God can vary with the circumstances of life and with what we think God is asking us to do.

And Peter shows us how to deal with that: despite being unsure, a little cautious, even sceptical we can still, however grudgingly, say yes to Jesus.

Well we've been fishing all night and didn't catch anything so... Jesus, you're crazy but whatever, ok then.

And no matter how sceptical our yes, it still paves the way for the miracle.

In this story, a miraculous catch of fish. I wonder what the big and little miracles in our lives have been? What they will be?

Or maybe our problem isn't scepticism. Maybe, like Peter, we're too overwhelmed by our own sense of inadequacy, of sinfulness, of how far our lives fall short of the glory of God. And that is a real psychological and spiritual barrier for many of us at various points in our lives.

But what is Jesus' response in this moment?

Do not be afraid.... Do not be afraid.

He doesn't pronounce forgiveness or even address Peter's anguish directly. He just gives him a new direction: fear no more! From now on you will be one who nets people!

Our lives are full of new directions. Some are dramatic: leaving home, the birth of a child, a change of career, retirement. Most are small, daily choices to live one way and not another, to follow Jesus or to follow our own path.

Sometimes conversion is presented as a big one-off dramatic event. Those happen – in the Bible and in life. But there's an on-going conversion that is as,

if not more, important. St Benedict called this the vow of conversion of life. By it, the monks (and nuns) promise not to become lazy in their efforts to strive for holiness, to persevere in faith. This is an on-going work, the choice every day and in each moment to say yes to Jesus and what following him means. And it applies to each of us whether we grew up with faith or came to it slowly, or dramatically. Every day we choose again to trust, to say yes to Jesus.

Some people have a dramatic yes. Jackie Pullinger – 75 years old and still a missionary – boarded a ship in England with nothing but a £10 note and a prayer that God would show her where to get off. When the boat pulled into Hong Kong in 1966, God ordered her to disembark and Pullinger the missionary obeyed. She started sharing the love of Jesus Christ with gangsters and the poor in the Kowloon Walled City. She began to see them set free from drug addiction and start new lives.

The yeses of most of our lives may not make for such good stories – but don't underestimate what a little yeast can do to a big old pile of dough, or how a little salt changes the flavour of a whole meal, or one candle can shatter the darkness. We can be inspired by people like Jackie Pullinger without having to live her life – other than to also say YES to Jesus.

The miracle, the love expressed in Jesus' words – these make it possible for Peter to go from a small trust to a bigger one. And we know how the story goes on and it certainly isn't perfection for Peter from then on. He makes stupid remarks and famously denies he knows Jesus three times, making Jesus' abandonment in his final hours of life complete.

But the goal isn't spiritual perfection or some moral high ground where the sun always shines. It is simply to trust God, and in the power of the Holy Spirit to say YES to Jesus, again and again and again.

Even when we can only manage a small trust;
Even when we don't see the miraculous catch of fish in our lives;
Even when we are floored by our inadequacy in the face of God;

We offer Jesus our yes, receive the miracle, and discover a new direction for our lives.

Trusting in that open invitation from Jesus to follow him again and again, let us stand to confess our faith.