

Three reflections on stories of vocation in Luke's Gospel

1. Simon: Luke 5:1 – 11 – a calling to follow

How did I get to know Jesus? Believe you me, I tried quite hard not to get to know Jesus. I heard the stories that came over the hill from Nazareth – how he had preached in the synagogue, that Sabbath when they tried to lynch him for saying that God cares about Gentiles as well as Jews. Too dangerous for me to handle, I said to myself. Best stay where I am. Not that I was exactly content in the fishing business. The Romans had a dried-fish plant down the lake at Magdala, and the demand was ruining the fish stocks. And besides that, I was starting to wonder if there might be more to life than scaling fish and mending the nets. But Jesus? No, thank you!

But when he came to Capernaum, whose house did he end up in? Mine! He'd healed all these people in the synagogue, and then my fool wife came running up and asked him to come and sort out her mother, who was running a fever. So there he was, right in the bedroom – and the fever left her, just like that. It made me think.

And then the next day, he was at the lakeside, teaching a huge crowd. I tried hard to be invisible, bent over the nets as I washed the fish-scales out. But it was no good. 'Simon', he called, already in my boat, 'give me a ride'. So I had no choice but to row him out a little way, then drop anchor while he taught. He was speaking about God's generosity and grace. I sat there, thinking that if God was really so generous he might have given us a fish or two the night before.

When Jesus had finished, he turned to me and told me to row out a bit further and put the nets down. I tried to be patient with him, though I knew there were no fish around there. I didn't want to be rude, not after the mother-in-law episode. 'OK, boss', I said, 'if you say so'. And then, suddenly, the nets were alive with fish, flapping and gasping, tearing the net, unbalancing the whole boat. I yelled for James and John to come and help, and then it hit me. Jesus had done this. He had found fish where there were none. He had fed my family, given me and the lads enough to sell, enough to keep us going all winter and beyond. After all my questioning and doubt, he had done this for me. 'Get away from me!' I said. I could not cope with the wonder of his presence, his power, over against all my reluctance and – sin; that was the word. 'Get away from me, for I am a sinful man'. And then I added, almost against my will, 'Lord'. I was on my knees in front of him, shuddering with awe and fear. And I can still remember the steady look in his eyes and his hands on my shoulders. 'Don't be afraid' – how many more times would I hear him say that? 'You will be catching people now'. No longer the fisherman, catching fish to die in the unfamiliar air, but someone who catches people up into the life they are really meant to have. And so I walked away from the boat, and followed him.

2. The man freed from evil: Luke 8:26 – 39 – a calling to remain at home

I remember nothing of the bad times. I was completely unaware of what I was doing. It wasn't until the moment of possession passed that I realised something awful had happened. People stood there, looking at me in horror. My clothes were ripped away, my body battered, my throat sore and my voice hoarse. And as time went on, I found myself chained and guarded, or far from home and not knowing how I had got there. In the end, I abandoned the attempt to live with other people and made my home among the graves, where I knew no-one was likely to be troubled by me, where the demon could torment me without tormenting others. But the loneliness made the torment worse, until every moment was dark, confused, subject to the demon's possession.

And then, suddenly, I was sitting on the grass in the sunshine, fully aware of my surroundings, watching a herd of pigs gallop off into the distance. What did the pigs have to do with anything? It was surreal, unbelievably weird. Was it another nightmare? My voice was hoarse, my body bruised, but there was a cloak over my shoulders, and a world that was empty of shadows. I looked around, wondering what on earth was going on, and noticed another man, standing close by, shading his eyes to watch the pigs disappear over the cliff into the lake. I felt oddly relaxed, safe even, in a way I had not known since the night the Roman legion came to punish our village for the activities of the local bandits, and my wife and my little son were among the victims.

But who was this man? What had he done, and why did I feel so secure in his company? He sat down at my side and began to speak about the power of God that was in him. I could feel the power, radiating from him, and it soothed my soul. For a little while it was just him and me, and I still remember that time as the most perfect half-hour of my life. I wanted it to go on for ever. But before long, the village elders came pelting over the hill to complain about the damage to their property, and he was starting to get into his boat and head off over the lake. 'Please', I begged, 'let me stay with you'. I would have given anything to be one of his disciples, to belong to this Jesus, so that I could go on feeling safe for ever.

But he said no. He said I had to stay and tell the village what God had done for me. I couldn't join him on his mission – I had a different job to do, right there where I was. I thought my heart would break as I watched the boat's sail disappear over the horizon. But in the end, I realised he was right. In that place, where everyone had known me as a madman, I was able to bear witness to the difference Jesus had made to my life, and they could all see it was true.

3. The woman with the flow of blood, Luke 8:43 – 48 – a calling to speak out

Once upon a time, there was a little girl with dark curls and rosy cheeks, who laughed all the time and made the grown-ups smile with her singing. It sounds like the beginning of a fairy story, and in a way, it is, for there is a happy ending to it, but only after a lot of trouble. That little girl was me, and I look back at her and smile. But as I grew into adolescence, life became harder. I began to dread the onset of bleeding every month, the pain, the embarrassment of coping with it, the exclusion from normal activity that happened to every woman, treated as unclean and isolated during those days. And then I found that for me, 'those days' were lasting longer and longer, until I was bleeding all the time. I spent my days alone, wanting only to hide, often forgetting to eat or care for myself. The doctors made various suggestions, all unpleasant, none effective.

And then I heard that Jesus was coming. Everyone had heard of him by then, the healer from Nazareth. What should I do? Did I dare approach him in public? In the end, I shrouded myself in a veil, worked my way to the front of the crowd and waited until everyone's attention was distracted by a much more important appeal. Then I stretched out my fingers and stroked the hem of his tunic; and I was better. There was no fuss, no bother, no words, even. And I slipped back into the crowd, reclaiming my anonymity, ready to hide again until I had worked out the next step.

But to my horror he stopped. He looked round. 'Who touched me?' Stupid question, his disciples told him – everyone was touching him in the crowd. But he knew that someone had touched him purposefully, seeking healing. I tried to melt into the crowd, wishing the ground would swallow me up. He kept on looking, scanning the crowd, and at last his eyes met mine and he knew. So I stumbled towards him, expecting to be bawled out – he was a rabbi and I was an unclean woman. Instead, he made a space for me at his side, motioned for quiet with his hand, and said to me, 'Tell them what just happened'. And as I told the story, I forgot the shyness, I forgot I was outcast. I was overjoyed, and once again, I was making people smile with delight.

And I continue to tell the story of that day. It's just one among many stories of Jesus, but it's my tale and I think it's my job to share it with others, to add it to the big picture of who Jesus is and what he can do for those who trust him. I'm healed – and I've found my way back to the ability to delight people, as I sing the songs of Jesus' love.