

## Lord of land and sea

Many people have asked me why I left my home and became a wanderer—first wandering all over my own land, and then throughout the empire.

It all comes back to the fact I was persuaded. I became persuaded of something that changed my whole perspective on life. I became persuaded about a man. It hardly seems right now to call him a man. But yes, he was a man all right. The toughest man I've ever known. I often think that if he hadn't been so full of grace, he'd have been the hardest man you're ever likely to see. He faced down priests and kings, soldiers and politicians, even hostile mobs, with nothing in his hands.

But that wasn't the most impressive thing about him—not by a long shot. It was in the more ordinary things of life, that we knew he was different—in the everyday things that were familiar to us. The things I'm going to tell you about, you will find hard to believe. I found them hard to believe, and I saw them with my own eyes. But it's because of what happened that I came to believe that my friend Jesus was no ordinary man, but he was the Lord of land and sea. That's why I've wandered free—there's nothing anywhere I need to be afraid of now.

The episode I'm going to tell you about—which lasted just over a day, a night and the following day—began when we had just received bad news. We heard that my friend's cousin John had been executed by the King. John, who was known as the Baptizer, was absolutely fearless and had condemned all the evil and corruption at the royal court. First the King imprisoned him, and then had him executed during some drunken feast.

We were all badly shaken by this, all of us that is except my friend. None of us was more grieved than he was, but he was not shaken. Not like the rest of us. We were all thinking if John wasn't safe, well, nobody was safe. But that didn't seem to bother him. He was fearless.

But he knew how we felt and he said we should all get away from it all for a while. What had made matters worse was the number of people that wanted to see him all the time. We had no time to ourselves, not even to get a proper meal. Anyway, I still had a boat, so I suggested we leave Capernaum and sail over to the other side. Jesus agreed and said we should sail for Bethsaida Julias (called after the Emperor's daughter, which distinguished it from the other fisher-town called Bethsaida, my home town).

We set off early the next morning. It was good to get back in a boat again. It did us good to get out on the

water. The wind was favourable, so we hoisted the sail and made good progress over to the north-eastern shore. When we got there, we didn't make for Bethsaida itself, but for a more remote area nearby, and Jesus led us up into the hills. We were just sitting there relaxing and eating and chatting, when some of us noticed a huge crowd of people coming towards us from the area where the Jordan River enters the Sea of Galilee.

How on earth had they found out where we were? Some of them must have covered about 10 miles in record time! And they seemed to have gathered folks from all around. They were now numbering thousands—far more than had originally been surrounding us in Capernaum! We all felt like running for it—further into the hills! But not Jesus. Instead he went to welcome them. He said he was sorry for them; they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. And right enough, they did look like a flock of sheep straggling up the hillside. And it's him that they were wanting as their shepherd. But that was him all over—the biggest heart I've ever known. But all I was thinking was "So much for our time of rest!"

And he said something else as he watched the people approaching. Philip was standing beside him at the time. And he asked Philip something that he thought really strange at the time. He said, "Where will

we buy bread for all these people?” Philip was rather taken aback, and he blurted out, “Even if we had eight months wages to spend, it would hardly give them one bite each!” Jesus smiled and let it go at that for the moment. It was only later we realised he was serious.

For most of that day Jesus was busy. First he stood there on the hillside and taught the crowds. In a fold of the hill there was a kind of natural amphitheatre—a lovely green place. Perhaps ten thousand people settled down there—men, women and children, whole families—and his strong voice carried clearly to them all.

What did he tell them? Well, you know, some of us at various times—those who could read and write—noted down things he said, and those of us who couldn’t write learned them by heart—because he said the same things many times. But that day, none of us can remember exactly what he said. I suppose we were so tired and disgruntled, and so busy organising the crowd, that we didn’t really pay attention. One thing I do remember, however, (this turned out to be really important) and that was that his theme was the Kingdom of God.

That was the theme of most of his preaching in those early days: the kingdom of God was near, and people had to turn from their sins and believe the good news. Of course you could hardly imagine a more

dangerous theme. Jesus had nearly been killed as a baby by old King Herod when he heard that the King of the Jews had been born in Bethlehem. And it was Herod's son, Antipas, the present ruler, who had beheaded John. Over and above all that, of course, there was the Kingdom of Rome, whose king, Tiberius, claimed authority over all. Even a town on the shore of Galilee was named after him.

In those days there was revolution in the air. Our sacred books told of a great King who would arise, defeat our enemies and set up an everlasting kingdom. There were several secret organisations planning for it, and there had even been people claiming to be that King, but none of them had succeeded. They had all been brutally crushed.

What didn't help that day was that Jesus not only spoke. He did something that many of the crowd had come to see. He healed. It was because of this that his reputation had gone far and wide. And I don't mean he just cured people with headaches and bad backs—the kind of things that a lot of quack doctors claimed to cure. Jesus restored paralysed limbs, cured leprosy and healed the insane; he made the cripple walk, the deaf hear and the blind see! That day no one who came to him (and there were hundreds) was turned away. Everyone was listened to. Everyone was touched.

Everyone heard just the right words for them. And everyone was healed.

But what put the tin hat on it was what he did at the end of the day. It was getting late, not long to sunset, so some of us went to him and said he should dismiss the crowd, so they could go to the towns and villages to get something to eat and find somewhere to sleep. Everyone was starving by this time and the children were getting tired and fractious—and not just the children!

But Jesus said, “They don’t need to go away. You give them something to eat.” As calm as you like! A few of us had heard what Philip had said earlier and we repeated it. Eight months wages and all that. He was quite unperturbed. He told us to go and find out what food there was. Well, we asked around, but of course everyone had eaten anything they’d brought, in the middle of the day. The only thing was, my brother Andrew came back with a wee boy who had five barley loaves and two fish. We never did find out why he had them. But Jesus said to him, “Bring them here to me”, and he did.

Then he told us to arrange for the people to sit on the grass in groups of about fifty. We did our best, and let me tell you it wasn’t easy! Where there were families, the groups turned out to be about double that size. In the end there were at least a hundred groups

gathered round on the hillside—that's why we know that there were at least 5000 men there, and about half as many again of women and children. People kept on asking "What's happening? What's this for?" We could only say, "Wait and see!" We hadn't a clue.

What happened next I can only describe in simple words, but that gives no idea of what really happened. Jesus took the bread and the fish, and he looked up to heaven and thanked his Father for the food. Then he started breaking up the bread and fish. He handed us some pieces to hand out to the crowd. We handed it out in turn to the various groups, and no matter how much people wanted, and no matter how often we came back, Jesus kept on breaking the bread and fish, until everyone had enough. As I said, if I had not seen it with my own eyes, I would not have believed it! But it happened. I was there.

To cap it all, Jesus asked us to gather up the pieces of bread and fish that people left, so that it could be taken to the poor. We gathered up twelve basketfuls! It was little wonder that when people realised what had happened, they started saying surely Jesus was the long expected King! There started to be some wild talk, instigated by the revolutionaries, that now was the time to make him king by force.

Jesus knew this was their plan, so he then told us to go back down to the boat and set off at once back to

Capernaum. He said he would join us later. We felt bad about leaving him in that situation, but there was no arguing with him when he spoke like that. And so we missed what happened next, although plenty people told us about it afterwards. All we saw was the crowds of people streaming down the hill setting off back home. What had happened? Something just as impressive as his feeding those thousands with little bits of fish and bread! He simply dismissed the crowd. He told them it was time to go home. And they went! One minute all the talk was of revolution. The next they were meekly setting off home. Such was the power of his voice.

Jesus, then, instead of following us at once, set off up into the mountains to pray, just as it was getting dark.

Meanwhile we were toiling at the oars. The wind had got up, and very soon we were trying to make headway in the teeth of a gale. We rowed for hours. The clouds blotted out the moon and the stars. It was pitch dark and soon we had no idea where we were—we were pretty sure we had been blown off course.

There was just the faintest glimmer of the approaching dawn in the sky when one of us cried out, “What’s that?” We all looked, and a terror took hold of me such as I have never known. I had fished those waters all my life, but I had never seen anything like

this. There was a ghostly figure in the midst of the storm. And it wasn't just standing still or hovering. And it wasn't being buffeted by the wind and waves. It was moving, walking majestically on the surface of the sea, moving effortlessly faster than the boat—overtaking us!

We were screaming, "It's a ghost!" and were nearly mad with fear, when the figure stopped and looked at us and said, "Courage! It's me. Don't be afraid." It was Jesus! Only we couldn't believe it. Could you?! He was standing there unperturbed on the surface of one of the stormiest seas I'd ever seen.

Then I don't know what entered my head, but I found myself saying, "Lord, if it's really you, tell me to come to you on the water!" Mad, I know, but I tended to do mad things every so often.

Jesus just said, "Come!" just like you would say to a little child. And like a little child I just got out of the boat. Now I have seen many things that Jesus did, and I have done many things myself, but for myself there has never been anything like that experience. There was I, Simon the fisherman, who knew more about the sea than most, standing on the sea, walking on the water towards Jesus! For a few glorious moments I felt everything was possible. I was gazing in amazement and reverence at the face of Jesus.

But suddenly my rational mind and all the habits of a lifetime kicked in. They screamed, “Look at the wind and the waves, you fool! You’re out of the boat. You’re going to drown!” And I looked away. I looked at the storm and at the raging waves, and I started to sink. In terror I cried out, “Lord, save me!”

The words were barely out of my mouth, when Jesus reached out his strong hand and caught me. “Little faith!” he said, “Why did you doubt me?” And he led me back to the boat. I had known a few moments of ecstasy, but now I knew an agony of failure. But it was a lesson I needed and one that has often come back to me.

Two surprising things happened when we got into the boat. First the storm ceased, and then when the cloud lifted we saw we were near the shore, at Gennesaret, just a mile or two from Capernaum!

But we had no time to really reflect on what had happened. As soon as people recognised Jesus, they started bringing those who were ill for him to heal them. Everywhere he went it was the same. It was some time before we got back to Capernaum, and when we arrived there we discovered that the crowds that Jesus had fed the previous day had made their way back and were full of questions. Where had Jesus got to? They knew he hadn’t got into the boat with us, and they

hadn't seen him pass them, nor had he got into any of the boats they had used to get back.

Jesus didn't answer that question, but he went into the synagogue and started teaching. He told them that they were looking for him not because they understood the miraculous sign he had performed, but simply because they had been well fed. He told them not to live for ordinary food, but for food he could give them for eternal life.

They didn't seem to understand this and they started asking him to perform miracles so they would believe in him—miracles like Moses did, giving the people bread from heaven. It is hard to credit these were the same people whom he had fed the previous day!

Jesus replied that he was the real bread that came down from heaven—the bread of life! He said everyone who came to him he would never turn away, and they would never be hungry or thirsty. Everyone who looked to him and believed in him would have eternal life.

This created terrible arguments. Some were saying “This is Jesus, Joseph the carpenter's son. How can he say that he came down from heaven?”

But Jesus went further. He said, “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats this bread, he will live for ever. The bread that I will give

him is my flesh, which I give so that the world may live. I am telling you the truth: if you do not eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you will not have life in yourselves. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life.” Little wonder this provoked even more arguments, disagreements and protests.

It was that day that things changed. Up until that time thousands crowded round to follow Jesus. They hung on his every word. They were agog to see him perform miracles. They talked glibly of a new kingdom and a new king. But they didn't want the kind of King that Jesus was. From that day many of those who had followed him turned back and no longer walked with him. The kind of kingdom they wanted was not what he was offering. They wanted worldly power, not eternal life. They wanted cheap power, not a costly kingdom.

As he watched the crowds walking away, including many who had once been most vocal in his support, he turned to us, to his twelve companions, and said, “You're not going away too, are you?” It was the most heart-rending of questions. What would we say? Into my mind flashed the sight of his hands breaking the bread and fish, his hand catching me as I began to drown, and his words about eternal life that stirred my soul even though I did not understand them, and I said, “Lord, who else can we go to? Only you have the words

of eternal life. We believe, we know, that you are God's Holy One."

So you see, I can wander far and wide in this world now—by land and by sea. There is nothing to fear. I know the one who is the Lord of land and sea, the one who multiplied the bread and fish, the one who put the stormy sea beneath his feet, the one who gave his flesh and blood so that I can have eternal life.

Matthew 14

John 6