

JESUS IN MY BOAT

by Steve Zeisler

In recent weeks Gary Trudeau's story line in the comic strip "Doonesbury" has been about a middle-aged reporter who goes to a college campus to interview the current generation of students. The backdrop to the story is the question, "Why are today's students reserved, inward, unaggressive, unimportant, compared to the generation of students of the late 60's and early 70's?" That was the heyday of student activism, when the student world was on the cutting edge of what was happening in this country. The reason Trudeau is an effective humorist is that he can take something that has substantial reality to it and skew it just enough to make it funny. The reality that stands behind his current series, I think, is that these really are questions being asked by the student world today: What has happened to the vitality, what has happened to the willingness to be involved in life and national concerns? Why have students changed?

Spiritually, those same questions are being asked, because during the time when radical political activity was the norm on campuses, it was also true that a radical spiritual life evolved. (All of us are familiar with the Jesus Movement that was reported in the press in those days.) I have often felt that I am a kind of living relic on the campus today--walking ancient history--because I am able to talk about what it was like to have been a student in those days when people took spiritual issues seriously and commitment to Christ was something that was expected of those who bore his name.

Now all of us, I think, can empathize with today's Christian student who looks back wistfully to those days when the spiritual life on campus was outspoken and folks were thoroughgoing in their commitment. We long to live in heroic times. All of us would wish to have been present when the great things were happening, when the major issues were being faced, when life itself seemed to really count for something, and the bright and extraordinary issues were being encountered. I think we often feel that when we read the Scriptures.

I was in a Bible study recently and we were talking about the life of Moses. One individual in the group said, "If only I could have had the experience of having God tell me in clear, unequivocal terms to go out and overthrow the most powerful empire in the world, and how to do it and what to say, and have the confidence that he was with me. What a tremendous experience that would have been, because so much of what I go through now is confusing and mundane and doesn't seem to have any kind of verve or excitement to it. I wish I could have lived in heroic times!" It is difficult for us, I think, to view the ordinary lives we live and the circumstances that we encounter on a daily basis and see what possible meaningful reference the Lord Jesus could have in those circumstances. Paul says in Romans 8 that the whole creation is groaning, looking forward to the revealing of the sons of God. Now that statement is made about us. We are the sons of God, and the whole universe is on its tiptoes, anticipating the day when we will be shown for who we are. I can't help but feel sorry for the universe, sometimes, when I look at myself, and I think, "It's groaning, waiting for me to be revealed, and here I am spending an hour in the line at the grocery store, cursing under my breath!" Here I am with an unbalanced checkbook, my life is taken up with difficulties at work, and coffee that doesn't taste very good. All the things that seem to make up my day-in and day-out experience have very little brightness, very little that would seem to be attractive and eternal in their significance. This is how I live, so it seems to me that 90 per cent of what I do bears little reference to the eternal, spiritual issues that I'm aware of in scripture.

My solution to that problem is to long for God to give me a call, to put me in a circumstance where I can rise above the daily mundane things that make up my life, and catch hold of the eternal issues and live in the brightness of Christ's glory. I want to be free of the mundane things in order to do something great for God. His solution, though, is not the same as mine. His answer is to involve himself in those circumstances. We have no indication in God's Word that his desire is ever for us to escape ordinary, day-in, day-out reality in order to do something great for him. His desire is for us to learn to make him Lord in those circumstances,

relearn to see him involved in the place I work, in the house I keep, in the neighborhood where I live, on the train that I commute to work on.

In Matthew 24 we see that at the end of time, when the world is about to pass away, God's children are spending their time working in the field and grinding at the mill--the same kind of things we do every day on the job, in the home, caring for our family, facing frustration, dealing with people who are difficult. If ever there was a time when we ought to be able to not worry about whether the house gets painted it would be immediately before the house is about to burn up. If ever there was a time when we ought to be able to stand for glorious things rather than be confused and muddled by the day by day things, it would be right at the end. But that is not where the Lord has his people. They are out in the fields working as they have been all along. They are facing the same issues that they have faced all along.

Another time, I think, when we would think that men and women lived on an exalted level would have been the time when the Lord was here on earth. And the disciples, the ones who were close to him, would seem to have an advantage over us in this regard. When they got confused about their priorities, when they found it difficult to get enough time to pray, when they seemed to be pressured by family responsibilities, wondering how they would make ends meet, they would seem to have had an advantage because the Lord lived in their town. They could walk down the street, knock on the door and say to him, "I've got confused priorities. I'm under pressure. I don't know how to handle it, what will I do?" And he would say, "Here's what the priorities ought to be, do these things," and that would clear it up for them!

But in practice we find that that isn't what happened. These men, just like us, loved their Lord, they wanted to serve him, they looked forward to knowing him better and cared for what he said, but they spent most of their time distracted, confused, uncertain and with mistaken priorities--just like us.

We are going to look at a passage in the fifth chapter of Luke where the Lord confronts this issue head-on. These events took place early in the Galilean ministry. Prior to this, these fishermen whom we are going to spend time looking at had seen the Lord accomplish two miraculous signs, the changing of water to wine, and the healing of the Capernaum man's son. They had seen him cleanse the temple once, they had heard him preach with power and insight, they had seen him relate to men as important as Nicodemus, and those who were as unimportant (from a human point of view) as the woman from Samaria. They had traveled with him, they had heard John the Baptist identify him as Messiah, so they had a great opportunity to know, and trust, and be close to, and involved with the Lord. They had a chance to see him for who he was, and yet they contradict our expectation, since with that kind of opportunity (which we view as so much greater than our opportunity to keep clear on what's important and what is not) they still struggled with the problem of seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. Let us look at Peter's distraction that is similar to ours. Luke, chapter 5:1-3

Now it came about that while the multitude were pressing around Him and listening to the Word of God, He was standing by the lake of Gennesaret; and He saw two boats lying at the edge of the lake; but the fishermen had gotten out of them, and were washing their nets. And He got into one of the boats, which was Simon's, and asked him to put out a little way from the land. And He sat down and began teaching the multitudes from the boat.

Now picture the situation if you will, and try to imagine that you are Peter the fisherman. As we will see in a moment, these men have worked all night long and caught not even one crummy fish. Now they are at the end of a long night's work, and doing the very menial, unpleasant task of cleaning the nets--the least desirable task of a long and difficult evening that has been frustrating for them. Then the Lord comes down to the beach and there's a crowd with him. I think we can imagine Peter's response. He loved his Lord, and he sat there and looked at the nets in his hands, and probably swore under his breath, "Why is it that I have to be caught up doing these things, when I could be with him? Other people seem to have found time to get away from the daily pressures and they're able to listen to him. Why can't I?"

Peter knew that he had been called into a special kind of relationship with the Lord and for the first time that we have recorded for us, Jesus is teaching Jews in a public setting, outside the synagogue. It is not a formal

religious occasion, and I imagine Peter is saying, "This is something new, it's an exciting new venture. The Lord is reaching out in a way I'm not familiar with. I wish I could be there. I wish I could be part of it." He looks at his net, he looks at his boat, and he says, "These things are the enemy." Making a living, being on the job, taking care of the house, sitting up all night with babies that cry, having people call you at the most inopportune moment, having correspondence pile up--all those things keep us from a chance to be with Christ. They distract us, they take all our energy, they demand our time, and we are left wishing that we could be free of the nets, wishing we could get rid of the boat and spend time learning from the Lord.

There is one basic fallacy I think we ought to deal with right at the beginning as we discuss this. When you look at the life of the apostles later on, it remains true that even when Peter does leave his boat and nets, his life consists of daily pressure and distraction. It is still a problem. For example, there is an interesting paragraph at the end of 2 Timothy concerning Paul's last request, as he is about to die. He has written Timothy telling him to preach the Word, and at the end he says, "Timothy, come see me because I'm lonely. I'm cold, I don't have a coat to wear, Would you bring a cloak along with you? And would you bring me something to read? It's boring, being alone in prison. Would you bring along some books and especially the Scriptures?" We see that the apostle Paul himself, with the single minded purpose that he had and the special ministry given him, still had to deal with things like that--all the same kind of things that take up our time.

It is not true that those who are most out front in their service to the Lord do not have the problems we have of what to do with the daily pressures. I think our thinking along those lines is wrong. But on top of that, what this passage is teaching us is that not only does everyone have those problems, but that the Lord intends to involve himself with them. The striking thing to me is that Jesus wants to preach from Peter's boat. This is the boat that has been so recently the scene of frustration for Peter, the boat that he longed to be free of, and the Lord comes and says, "Here's where I'll preach--in your boat!"

Perhaps you have the same frustration that Peter had as you face your kitchen table, your desk at the office, the lunch room where you eat, or the classrooms where you attend school. Maybe you feel as he did about the relationships you wish you could get rid of but you cannot--the boat you wish wasn't there, that you're dying to get rid of to be with the Lord--only to have Jesus walk up and say, "Here's where I'll preach from, your boat, your desk, the truck you drive, the cash register you work behind." Jesus wants to be in our lives in a way that he can say things about himself right in the middle of the thing that frustrates us.

Now I've always had a problem with seeing God use me in that kind of a situation. My problem is that I often feel that if I'm talking to someone who lives in my apartment house, or the guy I work with, I feel that I have to say everything there is to say if I'm going to share Christ with him. And since I rarely have the opportunity to say everything there is to say about Christ, I find myself not saying anything. I don't think we need to adopt that attitude. We can offer Jesus a chance to speak the truth in our boat, in our daily experience, by just saying little things, by sharing some of the truth.

Most offices in this country have Christmas parties at the end of December that are great occasions to get drunk and blow off steam. We can be in those situations and take the opportunity to say, "Do you know what I like about this season? Not just end-of-December parties--I like to reflect on the fact that God became a man once for our sakes." And you don't have to say anything more. Or after the PTA meeting, sitting next to that other family, to say, "I'm not only concerned that my children receive quality instruction in our school system, but it also burdens me that they receive quality instruction in their spiritual life." And that's all you have to say, perhaps. I think if we take those opportunities, if we make those references, if we let Jesus speak about himself he will use these opportunities effectively, as he used his preaching in Peter's boat.

But preaching was not the only thing that happened in the boat that day. There is a kind of naturalness, perhaps, about the Gospel being spoken in our everyday experience. It is a familiar enough concept to us in the Scriptures (although it is not an easy transfer to make), but if we think about it long enough we can make it. "Yes, it is proper, I suppose, that Christ have access to my everyday experience, to tell people about himself. There is a kind of appropriateness about that. It is not something I am confident about, but I can understand." But the next step is more difficult, I think. Verse 4:

And when He had finished speaking, He said to Simon, "Put out In the deep water and let

down your nets for a catch." And Simon answered and said, "Master, we worked hard all night and caught nothing, but at Your bidding I will let down the nets." And when they had done this, they enclosed a great quantity of fish; and their nets began to break; and they signaled to their partners in the other boat, for them to come and help them. And they came, and filled both of the boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw that, he fell down at Jesus' feet, saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!" For amazement had seized him and all his companions because of the catch of fish which they had taken; and so also James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. And Jesus said to Simon, "Do not fear, from now on you will be catching men." And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him.

The second thing that happened in the boat that day was that Simon learned that Jesus knew something about fishing--more than Simon himself knew. Simon was an expert fisherman, a strong, capable, experienced man, and in an area of his life that he ought to have been good at he had recently been an extraordinary failure--spending the whole night without catching anything. Then he saw the Lord step in and say, "I know more about this than you do." That was an important lesson for him to learn. Does it sound familiar? Have you ever bent all your determination and applied all your skills at something, seen it fall apart, and then realized that when that very thing is put in Jesus' hands there is success and fulfillment that you could never accomplish on your own?

There is an extraordinary passage in Charles Colson's book, "Born Again," where he talks about viewing his life as a public servant and never being able to say that he accomplished anything for the good of humanity. Although he had been one of the most powerful men in the world, in a position to put tremendous pressure and influence on the society--in fact, the world that he lived in--he could not say for sure that he had ever helped anybody. But by sharing his testimony on television, he encouraged a young soldier in Georgia, I think, to write to him and say, "Hearing you say that changed my life." And for the first time this powerful and successful man found that God had used him to do something that made a difference in someone's life. When the Lord told him where to fish, when it was Jesus who was calling the shots as to whether or not he was of service to people, things happened.

There's an arena where we can see this take place regularly, and that has to do with the "mating game." I've seen this countless times, and experienced it: "I am determined to find the right one for me." So I learn to hustle, how to dress and how not to dress, what to say, where to go, when to be casual and when to be cool, and all those things. But there is very little fulfillment, very little reality (though there might be brief flashes that seem to signify something positive is happening), nothing in terms of real weight and depth and fulfillment. But letting Jesus teach me to fish there, letting Jesus show me where to go has produced life--so that the boat is beginning to sink. When I learn to serve instead of being served, learn not to care so much for what others think of me, learn to want the best for someone else instead of the best for me, there is abundance and joy and fulfillment where there had only been hassle before. Jesus not only wants to preach from our boat, he wants to make the very experiences that make up life itself powerful and delightful and fulfilling for us. And he knows more about fishing than we know ourselves. Things we are the best at, he is better at, if we will allow him.

Now I want to quickly go through the steps I think that taught Peter this lesson. The first is, "Lord, you don't know what you're doing." Christ says, "Let's go out and fish," and Peter says, "He doesn't realize I've been fishing my head off all night long. There are no fish in this lake." That's our response often. The Lord is going to teach us how to be fulfilled in our day-in, day-out lives, and we say, "I have knocked my head against the wall for years on this thing. What do you know? But I'll obey you." That's the second step.

"Master, we worked hard all night and caught nothing, but at Your bidding I will let down the nets." Then, "they enclosed a great quantity of fish." I think this is the third step that we will see. When God begins to produce life we get so excited about it we ignore him. When I have finally been able to have a real relationship with someone, a man or a woman who really means something, I get so turned on about it that I spend all my time enjoying the things God has finally given me. And I don't suppose there is anything improper about that. That's what these fishermen did. Suddenly they catch fish, and they're all excited. "Come on out here, our boats are sinking, this is just the greatest! Real life in a relationship, after I've experienced so much death!"

Then the next step comes, and I think it's the word, "saw" in verse 8. In the Greek the word is in an emphatic position ("that" does not appear in the original text). I think what Luke means is that Peter didn't just see the fish, he saw the reality of what was going on around him. He had been reveling in what Christ had done for him, and then suddenly, he says, "I see what this means. Jesus brought me here. He's the Lord of all. He's the one who gives life itself. What have I gotten myself into? If he can do this for me, then he's greater than I ever gave him credit for." I think what Peter says then is, "Lord, get somebody better on your team. If you are that glorious, if you are that capable, then you want somebody who's got a lot more shots going for him than I do." That's why he says, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man." And that's the next step that is proper. Having seen the Lord for who he is, we need to analyze ourselves for who we are, and be honest with ourselves.

Then the final step is the Lord saying, "Peter, I can make man catchers out of people like you, people who are willing to admit their frailty, who aren't so proud and self-centered that they can't admit it." Now he called these men to leave their boats behind, and to launch out into a full time ministry. That does not mean that they left behind the pressures of life. None of us get to leave those behind. (There are examples in scripture, such as Lydia, who found that her home became the center of a church in Philippi.) Once we learn these lessons, the Lord may call us into a full time ministry, or he may call us to stay right where we are. But the lesson that needs to be learned is that the place God has us, and the mundane, ordinary things that make up our experience, are not the enemy. They are not the things that we should be freed from in order to know Christ. This is the very place where he wants to be present.

Two things happened in the boat that day: Jesus preached the truth about the kingdom of God right in the middle of the place where Peter worked and swore and got angry and frustrated. Second, Peter learned that Jesus could provide fulfillment and wealth and depth in areas of his life that he could not handle himself, I think those same two things can be true of our boat, and rather than be frustrated by what we're dealing with on an everyday basis, we need to see our frustrations as opportunities for Jesus to be present. Rather than longing to be somewhere heroic and bright, we ought to look to the Lord and say, "Here's where I'll stand. This is where I'll be involved."

Jesus can speak from our lives and he can take the stuff that our lives are made up of every day and give us joy and abundance there that we could never produce on our own. Let us thank him for choosing to invade our boats. Peter never invited him. It wasn't Peter's idea to say, "Gosh, I'd better get the Lord in my life here somehow, because I'm a mess." The Lord said, "Peter, I need to be there." It was his idea. And I think we ought to believe that it's the Lord's idea to be there in our lives. too, and thank him for that.

Lord, thank you that your choice for us is to know you, and to know you in the little things that so often we wish were not there, and that we want to do away with. We thank you that you intend to give us life in them. Lord, we recognize that we will never be man-catchers, we will never be effective in your service, until we are willing to make you Lord in our day-in and day-out experience. Thank you for these things and for your Word that is a light to us. In Jesus' name, Amen

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