

### **Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,**

There must be hundreds of thousands of people today longing for a miracle such as the one we have just heard. Close to half of the working population in South Africa is unemployed and the current recession has made things much worse.

It is our economic structure that cause some people to rise up powerfully into higher income brackets, while a great number of people are pushed to the sidelines or out of the formal economy altogether. I have written several books on this.

We do not belong to the desperately poor. We are relatively privileged. This morning I want to share with you two stories taken from the Bible which may help us find our place in the overall situation.

### **From blessing to frustration (Gen 2-3)**

The first story is found right at the beginning of the Bible and we all know it. Adam and Eve find themselves in a wonderful garden. Everything is green and fresh and beautiful. There are fruits all around them to pick and eat.

They are working hard and enjoying their work thoroughly. In the evening they sit around the fire and talk. Or they sing to the guitar. They are dead tired but very happy. After a good night's sleep they are full of vigor. They get out of bed, stretch and cannot wait to get to work again. A blessed and fulfilled life!

And then comes that snake: Hey, what about eating from that tree in the middle of the garden? No, they say, we have enough; God has given us all we need and much more! Hah, you don't know what you are missing! You think you are happy with that old tjorrie? You don't know what a four by four feels like! That new play station is fantastic. Your cell phone has been obsolete for months now. You will look smashing in those designer shoes.

Adam and Eve become deeply dissatisfied. They forget about all the wonderful things that God had given them and focus their attention on what they do not have. They become reckless. They grab what they cannot afford. What the heck – we will see tomorrow!

Tomorrow they find themselves outside the wonderful garden. Here they try to eek out a living on a rocky place full of thorn trees. They are working like donkeys but harvest next to nothing.

Debt repayments eat up most of their salary. The new cell phone is already obsolete, but the overdraft is still there. The lounge suite is repossessed. The

value of the new house has dropped, but interest on the original loan still has to be paid.

From blessing to frustration. The snake makes all people unhappy with the gifts God has given them in such abundance. What a shame. And so unnecessary. It could have been different so easily.

### **From frustration to blessing**

Today's gospel turns the situation around. Here are four young fisher men who have worked all night and caught nothing. They are dead tired; they are hungry; they are cold. They don't know how to feed their families. They are sad and frustrated. But they do not give up. This is life. Life is not easy. It has always been like that.

And then something unexpected happens. A stranger gives them advice – very strange advice indeed. Obviously he has no knowledge of the profession. You don't fish in deep water where your nets do not reach the bottom; you fish along the shore. You don't fish in day time; you fish at night when the fish come closer to the surface.

Peter could have said to Jesus, O come on, you don't know what you are talking about. You are a preacher, stick to your preaching. I am a fisher man; I know what I am doing. That would have been the typical stance of the professional. She knows her job. She has a degree. She has the experience. You don't come and tell her what to do.

But this time it is not the snake speaking. Peter is humble enough to listen. So they go out and try. They catch an enormous amount of fish. Everybody is breathless. What is happening here? From frustration to blessing. Suddenly people harvest the fruit of their labor. What a gift! That is life in its fullness.

### **What happened?**

We always expect miracles when we think of God's blessing. Hitting the jackpot; winning the national lottery; getting an unusual promotion. But God has put us into the world he has created. He does not have to take us into a fairy land. He wants to bless us right where we are. Let us look more closely at the story.

The fish did not fall straight from heaven into Peter's pot. They were already there in the lake. They were just at another place. The fish also did not jump into the boat all on their own. Peter still had to throw out his net once again – in spite of his painful arms. If you are not prepared to pull your weight you get nowhere.

Then the real work began. The fish were so heavy that they could not manage to pull them out on their own. They had to call others for help. That made things complicated. Probably they had to share the fish in the end.

And then the nets began to tear. They could easily have lost all the fish and even their precious nets. What a frustration that would have been! There are hazards all the way. That is life. Life is not easy and it is not supposed to be easy. That is how our world is constructed. But frustration is turned into blessing, rich, rich blessing.

There is another interesting aspect in the story. Peter's horizons had been too narrow. He was fixed on one part of the lake and on one way of catching fish. He did not think of alternatives. Jesus told Peter to try some unlikely places and it worked.

The same can happen to us. Perhaps standing in long queues is not the best way to gain employment under current circumstances. Perhaps you have gifts that you have never really discovered. Perhaps your best chances are where you least expect them.

Come on, I told a young man not knowing what to do, upgrade your matric. Find an access program at the University. Find a bursary. It worked. He just obtained his Bachelor's degree. Now go out and be alert. Allow God to guide you to the right places.

### **Peter realizes who he is – a creature of God**

What happens now is again surprising. Peter might have jumped out of the boat beaming – hey, Jesus, you are fantastic! Join our company – with your kind of catching fish and with our muscles, we can make a killing. Peter did not do that.

Peter also might have gone into the canteen that evening, ordering a round of beer and bragging among the fisherman – hey you should have seen the catch I made today – you will never equal it!

No, Peter breaks down on his knees. He realizes that this was a gift of God. He is not worth of the blessing, in spite of all his hard work. He suddenly understands who he really is – a dependent creature of God.

He always thought he was in control of his life. He always thought he could manage drawing on his own resources. Now he realizes that life is a gift of grace. The lake, the fish, the boat, his strong arms and his knowledge as a fisherman are gifts of God.

Here before him is a man who lives and acts not in his own power and authority but in the power and authority of God. Standing before Jesus, Peter feels embarrassed and unworthy. Please go, Jesus, you and I don't match.

What a transformation. Following their own head against God had led Adam and Eve out of blessing into misery. Guidance by the grace of God led Peter out of misery into blessing.

## **Join the global enterprise of God**

But this is not the end of the story. The most astonishing thing is still to come.

The horizons of Peter are opened in even a much greater way.

Jesus calls Peter and his fellow workers into his own business. Jesus' business is not limited to a little village along the lake of Galilee. It is a multi-national enterprise with a global mission. Gosh – what a privilege!

It is OK to catch a few fish every night to feed a few families every day. That is part of the blessing of God. But it must be seen in a much greater context.

There are hundreds of thousands of people all around us who got stuck in their frustration, who yearn for blessing, who try to achieve it on their own using their own resources.

Jesus expects Peter and his fellows to come and join him. What Jesus has done to Peter, Peter will now do to others. He will now become a Christ to others, as Luther said.

This then is the real miracle that can happen to us: the concern for our own well-being changes into concern for the well-being of others and God's world as a whole. Peter and his companions left everything behind and followed Jesus.

When that happens, you may still be a house wife and mother. You may still be a worker on the roads. You may still be a teller in the supermarket. But now you are part of a great project – God's own project to lead the world out of selfishness, violence, suffering and futility.

You can serve God in and through your profession. But it can also happen, as it happened to me, that you are called into full time service. Then you drop your previous occupation and start from scratch.

## **What happened to all the fish?**

There is yet another surprise in the story. What happened to all those fish? The story does not even bother to tell us. This shows they were never the most important thing in the first place.

For all his adult life Peter had seen nothing but fish. When he got to bed he was thinking fish. When he stood up he was thinking fish. When drinking tea with his fellows they were talking fish. When he was on the lake he was thinking fish.

This is what happens when the snake talks to us: we fall asleep focused on that cell phone; we wake up with that four by four before our eyes. Our minds are occupied with lots of small things that have become far, far too big in our lives.

Peter suddenly saw these small things in perspective. The stars disappear from sight when the sun goes up. In comparison with God's vast project the cell phone becomes a tool at best, a nuisance at worst. It is not wrong to relax

with a good DVD. But then the gadget does not determine your life. There are really much, much more important things in life than that.

When our small things become small and God's big things become big, a real miracle has happened. It is then that you really have gone from frustration to blessing.

Now ask yourselves – which of the two stories would you like to become your own story – from blessing to frustration, or from frustration to blessing?

### **Let us pray**

Lord, your gift of life is wonderful. We have all we really need and more. There are people around us who are less privileged than we are. Yet we are anxious, frustrated and disappointed with what we have. Many of us long for the kind of life that seems to elude us.

Open our eyes to your great gifts. Let us participate in your life. Let us become partners in your project. Use the lives you gave us to bless others. Amen.

(Klaus Nürnberger 12-07-09)