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Letting your net down: Then Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will fish for people."

Evangelism Feature Article

The Potential is Vast (Mission Impossible)

We have seen people's lives transformed hundreds and hundreds of times. Some may say our vision is Mission Impossible. But I believe it is the mission God is giving to us in our generation, and it is not an impossible vision. I am convinced it is a vision worth going for.

— Nicky Gumbel

One day as Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret, the people were crowding around him and listening to the word of God. He saw at the water's edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from shore. Then he sat down and taught the people from the boat. When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch." Simon answered, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets." When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. So they signalled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink. When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners. Then Jesus said to

Simon, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will fish for people." So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him. Luke 5:1-11

Shane Taylor was considered one of the most dangerous men in the UK prison system. Originally jailed for attempted murder, he had his sentence extended by four years when he attacked a prison officer with broken glass, setting off a riot.

He was put in a segregation unit inside a maximum-security prison. He was given his food through a hatch. His door was not opened unless there were six officers armed with riot shields waiting outside.

Later, he was transferred to Long Lartin maximum-security prison where he was invited to an Alpha course. During the course he prayed, "Jesus Christ, I know you died on a cross for me. I hate who I am, who I've become. Please forgive me and come into my life." At that moment he was



Nicky Gumbel
Nicky Gumbel is the pioneer of Alpha and Vicar of HTB in London, one of the largest Church of England churches in the UK. He is the author of a number of bestselling books including *Questions of Life*, *The Jesus Lifestyle*, *Searching Issues*, and *A Life Worth Living*.

Alpha is a series of sessions exploring the Christian faith. Each session looks at a different question around faith and is designed to create conversation. Alpha is run all around the globe, and everyone is welcome. No two Alphas look the same, but generally they have three key things in common: food, a talk, and good conversation. In total, 29 million people have tried Alpha in 169 countries and 112 languages to date.

The Titus Group had the pleasure of partnering with Alpha in their new Film Series - an updated, relevant and engaging resource designed to take the audience on an epic journey exploring the basics of the Christian faith.



Nothing is impossible with Jesus, he makes what seems to be impossible possible.

▲ **Fishers of men:** Nicky Gumbel shares that making disciples of all nations becomes the central mission of the Church.

filled with the Holy Spirit. Everything changed overnight. He said, “I knew God existed, I knew Jesus had touched me and I was going to live for him forever.”

His behavior changed so much that he went from living in total segregation to getting a trusted job in the prison chaplaincy. Whilst still in prison, he started sending money to a charity in Africa. He prayed for the prison officers and for his enemies and, when he came out of prison, he got involved in a church. He met a girl called Sam, who had also had a tough life and had been involved with drugs and criminal activity. She also came to faith in Jesus. Now, they are married and have four children.

Talking to Shane now, it is hard to imagine that he is the same person who terrified so many people in his past. He says, “Jesus has shown me how to love and how to forgive. He has saved me. He has forgiven me for what I have done. He has turned my life around.”



Shane Taylor

At first sight, the mission that Jesus has given us seems totally impossible. Jesus said to his disciples, “Go and make disciples of all nations”. That is a big mission statement. And yet our mission has been given to us by Jesus and it is not impossible. Jesus says to Peter, “From now on you will

be catching people”. This is about far more than just fish. This is about the central mission of the Church, and in this passage, Jesus gives us some essential guidelines.

01

The potential is vast (v.4)

In verse 4, it says that when Jesus had finished speaking, he said to Peter, “Put out into deep water and let down the nets for a catch”. Simon answered ‘Master we’ve worked hard all night and haven’t caught anything.’ They hadn’t caught anything, but that did not mean that there were no fish to catch. In his commentary on this passage, William Barclay writes, “In the Sea of Galilee there were phenomenal shoals which covered the sea as if it was solid for as much as an acre”. There were masses of fish out there but they had not caught any.

As we look at the world today, there are hundreds of millions of people out there who don’t have a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. And yet there is a great spiritual hunger. I do not think it is just my imagination. One of the highlights of my week is listening to the discussion in the Alpha small group I help with. It is fascinating to hear people’s thoughts and feelings about the big questions of life. Again and again, people talk about this spiritual hunger, this desire to find purpose. There is a longing, at times recognized and at times hidden, for a relationship with God.

02

Nothing is impossible with Jesus (v.5)

Jesus makes what seems to be impossible possible. The point that Jesus was making to his disciples was that there were masses of fish out there but they were going about catching them in the wrong way. It is so easy to go about things in ways that are clearly not working. So often, we do things the way they have always been done, because this feels safe and comfortable and because we are human and fear risk or failure. It is interesting to read in v.2 that the fishermen were “washing their nets” - a comforting activity involving neither risk nor potential failure, nor of course the accomplishment of their goal. Why would they clean the nets? Because they had not caught any fish. There is nothing wrong with cleaning nets. In fact, it is a very good idea. But it is not the main purpose of nets. When the church stops catching fish it starts cleaning nets - to make itself look busy. Eventually, we give up trying to catch fish and settle for cleaning the nets permanently. We wonder whether it is worthwhile trying to catch fish - because that will make the nets dirty again - and anyway we feel there is not much chance of catching any. It interests me that verse five does

not end with Peter saying, “Master we have worked hard all night and haven’t caught anything...” but I do believe what follows this statement is a long pause, and during that long pause, Jesus was looking at Peter. And after the long pause, Peter said, “But because you say so, I’ll let down the nets”. And to his credit, he did. He was willing to believe Jesus. He let down the nets and Jesus made what seemed impossible possible. And Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever - and that is what he is doing now. In 1994, we had a vision for 5,000 Alpha courses by the end of the century. It seemed so impossible that it could not happen and we feared it would incite ridicule if we even mentioned it. If it did not happen, we would feel bad and people would feel let down. So we were very hesitant about referring to it.

Yet our faith was far too low. By the end of the century, we saw nearly 7,000 courses running in the UK and almost double that around the world. It was not about people doing a course but about people coming to faith in Jesus Christ, having their lives transformed. Now around 29 million people around the world have completed Alpha- and the numbers are continuing to grow. It is amazing to see what God is doing. The potential is vast. And nothing is impossible with Jesus.

03

It cannot be done alone, but only in Partnership (v.7)

“So they signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink”. Nothing that we do with Alpha can be done except in partnership. It is no one-man show, no one-woman show. Within the local church, the body of Christ needs to work together to fulfil all the different functions that running

a course involves. Within the wider sphere, it is thrilling to see so many churches coming to work alongside us as partners. And it is wonderful to work with so many different churches, Roman Catholics, Methodists, Baptists, Southern Baptists, and the Salvation Army. We have Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Pentecostals, people of entirely different theological positions, all running Alpha as we strive together to get this message out across the world.

29 million people have tried Alpha in 169 countries and 112 languages to date

This is the most extraordinary thing that God is doing. It’s a partnership between all the different churches. We are truly in it together with every person involved in the vision, which we believe God has given us. We are seeing that all over the world. What we are interested in is people coming to Christ, unity coming to the churches and those churches coming alive.

04

It is a vision worth going for (v.11)

“Then Jesus said to Simon, ‘Don’t be afraid. From now on you’ll catch men and women’. So they pulled their boats on shore and left everything and followed him.” Effectively they said, *This is so exciting Lord. People are coming into the kingdom. People’s lives are being changed. This is worth us going for. And they left everything.*

They made sacrifices because the potential was so vast. And it is. The potential stretches across the world. Alpha is now running in

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169 countries. Only the Spirit of God could do something like this.

I cannot find the words or the ability to express what we have experienced as we have gone around the world and heard testimony after testimony after testimony from people who have described the difference Jesus has made to their lives because they have attended an Alpha course.



Darrell Tunningley

Darrell Tunningley started out 'nicking car badges from expensive cars like Mercedes and Porsches.' He later reflected, 'It's scary how quickly you can go from stealing Mars bars to cars.' He became a drug addict: 'When I started to use heroin I truly believed I would stay in control and that the drug would never control me. How wrong I was!' Soon Darrell was selling drugs himself. He was eventually sentenced to five-and-a-half years in prison for armed robbery. He had become an extremely violent man.

In prison he agreed to attend Alpha, mainly because of the offer of 'free

coffee and biscuits'. He encountered Jesus Christ. Darrell quotes 2 Corinthians 5:17: 'This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!' He was filled with the Holy Spirit.

'Life had never been so good, I had bars on my windows but I never felt so free', he writes. He started running Alpha in prison. 'More people were becoming Christians in the prison and the numbers at Sunday service kept going up and up. More and more people were choosing to live a drug-free life.'

On 4 August 2000, Darrell was released from prison and became an accredited minister with the Assemblies of God. He met a young woman called Rebekah and has since become a husband and a father.

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► **Everyone has questions:** Nicky Gumbel believes that everyone should have the chance to explore the Christian faith, ask questions and share their point of view, wherever they are in the world.

