

Holy Trinity Headington Quarry 22/4/07 10.00am
Third Sunday of Easter
Acts 9:1-6 [7-20], John 21:1-19

May I speak in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

Why did the disciples go back to fishing in the Sea of Galilee, after they had seen Jesus in the Upper Room, and Thomas had acclaimed him as “My Lord and my God” as we heard last week? Several answers come to mind: perhaps they didn’t feel ready to embark on a great career of preaching; perhaps they needed to build up resources before setting out; perhaps they felt that fishing was what they did best; or perhaps they needed another prod from Jesus before they realised what it was he was calling them to do. Of course, this is speculation. But when it comes to our own discipleship, we too can be somewhat slow in hearing God’s call, or give a number of reasons why we should do what we’re used to doing rather than go off into the unknown.

The key to today’s story is Peter. We’re used to thinking of Peter as the leader of the disciples, the spokesperson. In later Church tradition, of course, Peter comes to stand for the authority of the Church in Rome, and the Pope is seen as Peter’s successor. In Matthew’s Gospel, we have the line “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church”. But Peter is not always presented as an obvious authority figure in the Gospels – and sometimes he seems, frankly, a bit nutty. Remember the transfiguration, where he starts blathering on about how good it would be to build three tents? Now, this morning, he sees Jesus on the shore when he’s still in the boat and what does he do? He puts on his clothes and jumps into the lake – and swims to the beach. Surely he can’t have been embarrassed by the fact that he had no clothes on, since it wasn’t unusual for fishermen to work naked. I’ve been trying to find some way of connecting this detail with the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis, when they unnecessarily make themselves clothes before going into the presence of God. Perhaps there’s a link: the more times I read John, the more parallels I find with the Hebrew Scriptures, and the fact that he tells us that there were 153 fish has been connected with the number of rivers in the world according to Ezekiel.

But I shall settle for a superficial explanation for the time being, that the story of Peter jumping into the lake reminds us of his impetuosity, his eagerness to be with Jesus. Remember how he was the first to blurt out a confession of faith: “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God”. Now, when the beloved disciple says to Peter, “Look, there’s Jesus” – Peter’s first reaction is rush to see him, forgetting all about his friends and the fish. We might pause to note that Peter doesn’t immediately recognise Jesus for himself. Even when the rest of the disciples join them on the beach and eat breakfast together, there’s a peculiar sort of tension: no-one dares to ask Jesus who he is, and yet at the same time they know that this mysterious figure on the shore is the Lord. I’m reminded of that line from *The Little Prince* by Antoine de St-Exupéry: “It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.” (On ne voit bien qu’avec le coeur; L’essentiel est invisible pour les yeux.)

The disciples and Peter see God with their heart, although their minds may still be perplexed. Maybe this story should be read in conjunction with Jesus’ words to Thomas which we heard last week, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.” Peter doesn’t believe because he sees Jesus; he doesn’t have any special knowledge that places him above the other disciples. It’s only when the other disciple tells him “It is the Lord” that he responds. He responds straightaway, and even if he appears faintly ridiculous, he responds with unquestioning commitment and evident love.

I suspect that John is setting out a model for Christian mission: the disciples, the fishers of men, will lead people to Jesus by telling them about him, by pointing them towards him. However, it remains up to the individual how they respond. Thomas sets up a list of seemingly impossible criteria which he wants fulfilled before he believes. Peter grabs his clothes and jumps into the water, leaving his friends to cope with the boat and the fish. We shouldn’t be hasty to judge that one of these ways is preferable, or that either is without fault: Jesus appears to both Peter and Thomas, and gives each of them what they need in order to believe in him. He satisfies the questioning mind and the impulsive heart. And he also has concern for their physical needs: there’s something refreshingly practical and down to earth about his invitation to the disciples to “come and have breakfast”.

However, breakfast alone will not turn the disciples into fishers of men. There's a danger that after having caught their fish and eaten it, they'll go back and catch some more and not realise the significance of what they have seen and eaten. What they need is a leader, a leader who sees that there's more to life than fish. And who left the fish and the boat behind to go to see Jesus? Peter. Now, leaders have to be committed, which Peter certainly is. But they also need to be reliable: impulsiveness is not a good quality, especially if it means leaving people behind. So Jesus tells Peter three times to "feed his lambs", to "tend his sheep". (Incidentally, having criticised the translation of last week's Gospel, I can commend it this week for reproducing the variety of the Greek: each of Jesus' commands has a slightly different wording.)

Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves him. Three times, because it curbs his impetuosity: to be a leader, he must be reliable. Three times, because it matches Peter's threefold denial of Jesus before the cock crew: his past is forgiven, but not forgotten. Three times, because love must be shown in deeds rather than words, as David reminded us on Maundy Thursday. The consequence of loving Jesus for Christian leaders is not to leap out of the boat and rush towards him, but to care for and tend his flock. In fact, the words that follow underline this: traditionally, they have been taken to support the story that Peter was also crucified, as he stretched out his hands and was led where he didn't want to go. But the scholar Michael Goulder has suggested that this, our oldest account of Peter's death, shows he died peacefully in old age: Jesus is telling him not to rush off to martyrdom in his enthusiasm, but to grow so old that he needs someone else to dress him and guide him and in this way to glorify God.

So this passage sets out a model for Christian mission, and also a pattern for Christian leaders. As we prepare for our new priest-in-charge to arrive, we should reflect on what we expect of Christian leaders. I have no idea whether the interview panel asked the same question three times, just to make sure they'd picked the right person. But what Peter shows us is that leaders are human: they make mistakes, they sometimes make fools of themselves, they don't always recognise Jesus. But despite this and despite their earlier failures, they love God and are committed to him. And that's a model for us all – as we gather round God's table this morning in response to his invitation to "come and have breakfast". **Amen.**