

Faithless Certainty (John 21:1-19)

10:00am Holy Communion – 4th May 2025

After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. Simon Peter said to them, 'I am going fishing.' They said to him, 'We will go with you.' They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, '**Children, you have no fish, have you?**' They answered him, '**No.**' He said to them, 'Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.' So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, 'It is the Lord!' When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the lake. But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off.

When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, 'Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.' So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, **a hundred and fifty-three of them**; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, 'Come and have breakfast.' Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, 'Who are you?' because they knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Feed my lambs.’ A second time he said to him, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Tend my sheep.’ He said to him the third time, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’ Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, ‘Do you love me?’ And he said to him, ‘Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Feed my sheep. Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.’ (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.)
After this he said to him, ‘Follow me.’

<prayer>

Have you ever fallen flat on your face? Got it completely wrong? Not just an explainable mistake that could be considered unfortunate, but a total flop. I bet you have, as I have too. I could give you one of my own examples, but then you would probably remember that more than anything else I say this morning. Abject failure is a sign of humanity, where humility is the only answer. Total admission, in total failure, makes a person real.

In the resurrection, Jesus appears on *eight* separate occasions to various people, with each appearance bearing some special significance. I only wish I had the time now to go through each of these with you. In this short time we can have a look at one of the resurrection accounts in the Gospel of John.

By the way the gospels present the resurrection to us, you could read it that Jesus is popping-up all over the place. It goes on over several weeks. Could the disciples consider him *back* with them, back to *stay*? Is

he in any sense *around at the moment*? Does anything remain of all they had done together? Have the Romans and the religious authorities achieved their aim of putting a stop to the Jesus movement? Are they coming for us now? They don't know.

We should not be surprised to find that disciple Peter has decided to lead a number of his fellows back to fishing. There is nothing else to be done – they still needed to make a living. A bit of certainty is required. Jesus is not there to be followed around like before and so perhaps they would now have to fall back on their old professions as a matter of necessity.

Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. Gathered there together were Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. Simon Peter said to them, 'I am going fishing.' They said to him, 'We will go with you.' They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

It sounds like an anti-climax, a really frustrating time. Peter is the type to get on with things – *let's at least do something*, but he leads the other in achieving nothing. **Peter leads them in completely the wrong direction – for a pointless and fruitless fishing trip.** In a matter-of-fact sort of way, Jesus appears, or so they think. In the early morning light, someone is seen on the shore of Lake Galilee, shouting instructions that they should cast their nets onto the other side of the boat. They are about a hundred yards from the shore and so they can't be sure who is telling them this, but they seem to comply anyway. **In fact, in most of the resurrection stories we can find some aspect of misunderstanding on the part of the disciples** – think of the doubts of Thomas, the disbelief of the men when the women told them the tomb was empty, or perhaps when two disciples met Jesus on the road to Emmaus and didn't even recognise him.

So too it is with the fishermen. **And we may be no different: faith in Jesus Christ has always been more about accepting what Jesus has said and done than what we can merely see or hear, or recon to normality.**

The net did go back into the water and a fantastic catch was the result. At this point it seems to click with one of the disciples, probably John, that such a miraculous event is just the sort of thing that Jesus did and so without much further ado he exclaims **‘It is the Lord!’** I’m not sure what Peter’s state of mind is here because for some odd reason it reads that: **‘When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and THEN jumped into the lake!’** The others in the boat are left to drag on behind and eventually haul the great bag of fish up onto the shore. There is then this surreal scene where Jesus cooks breakfast and it’s all a bit tense. John tells us that: **‘none of the disciples dared to ask him, ‘Who are you?’ because they knew it was the Lord.’** **Every single one of them is caught out.**

When I am asked by people how I can prove that the gospels are true, I’m not sure that any answer I could give would satisfy then anyway. **In any matter of life, if you have certainty then you have no choice.** If something is definite, and affects you profoundly, then you would be mad to reject it’s implications. No great belief or faith is required where certainty is present.

But doubt gives choices, and choices made from doubt must be backed up by some faith or hope that you have made the right choice. **It seems paradoxical but, you are more likely to carry strong conviction when faced with doubt – not with certainty.**

The gospels don’t tell us of some shadowy apparition, fleeting and ephemeral – Jesus is there in flesh and blood. The story here is of a real fellow who sat and cooked a fish breakfast – and it was written by one of the people who was there! There can be no mistaking it. **It should be proof to many, but that does not immediately give rise to faith.**

John goes on to tell us that ‘Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and he did the same with the fish.’ It’s almost *unremarkable*.

I wonder what other discussions took place as they ate together. Well, we are given some detail in the shape of a little exchange between Jesus and Peter. Hanging around in the background is the unsaid and **very uncomfortable memory of Peter having fled from Jesus just before his crucifixion and denied him three times. You remember his words – ‘I don’t know this man!’** So now is the time to get it cleared up. Jesus deals with the hurt of those denials by asking Peter: do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me? Yes, Yes, Yes! are Peter’s responses.

‘Peter felt hurt because Jesus said to him the third time, ‘Do you love me?’ And he said to him, ‘**Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.**’ ‘Feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep Jesus tells him.’

It wasn’t a great day for Peter – how embarrassing! Not only is he reminded of his gross failure to remain with his promises to Jesus: ‘*I will never leave you*’, but then he is exposed also as a fishman who can catch no fish. It is as if Jesus says – *yes you might well lead everyone back to their old professions when I am not here, but that will not give you the certainty which you seek.* ‘I won’t always be there to tell you where the fish are!’ **Yet there is a calling of life for Peter, as there is for us, in which Jesus will always be present.** Let me show you a new way – and that is the one where I *shall* be with you - always.

Peter is now to be a shepherd. I doubt he ever went fishing again. **So Peter is told something of the task ahead, something for the leader – a checking of commitment, but recognition that the leader holds imperfections. Don’t be too certain of yourself, you need me with you.** I can only agree from my own experience.

Peter's failed efforts, his empty net, provided nothing for anyone to eat upon his own strength, experienced fisherman though he was. Now it seems bizarre that Peter is instructed to *feed the sheep, tend the flock and feed the lambs* – something in which he has no experience. He will be completely unable to do so with his empty net, and he will be completely unable to do so without God's Holy Spirit.

Surely here is a reminder to us all that with God great things are possible if we are in Christ. Three times Peter had denied Christ, now three times he is brought back to the centre of God's plans and given a new instruction. Peter had utterly failed and let down his Lord, yet was still placed as the Earthly leader of God's new covenant. **So what do we have to worry about? A change to follow Christ, to take his instruction and perhaps for some his leadership, will be accompanied by the certainty of his presence.**

Peter will lead the disciples and lead the Church, **looking to God** to bring guidance and direction, instruction and plan. *Tell me the way you want me to go.* If we do that then we too shall all eat from the great catch, but more importantly we will have provided an infinite abundance left over for all. **That could describe our mission in this local church.**

I have preached often about how we as a church and as individuals are laced with doubts and imperfections. **Our own strengths and abilities alone will not be enough to lead the Church in the future.** Yet our own directions can surely be successful if we look to God, the perfecter of our faith to lead us in his Spirit. There really is no other way.

Amen