

Sermon preached by Revd Ross Fishburn

St Paul's Canterbury

Third Sunday in Easter

Sunday 1 May 2022

John 21:1-19 Acts 9:1-6

There they were by the Sea of Tiberias, having been out all night and caught nothing, but then Jesus appeared and they caught a great load of fish. They'd finished breakfast, of fish barbequed on the charcoal fire, and Jesus asks Simon Peter a question. *Simon Son of John do you love me more than these?* To which he replies *Yes Lord , you know that I love you.* And Jesus says. *Feed my lambs.*

But then he repeats the question. . *Simon Son of John do you love me?* A more unqualified question. One wonders what Peter made of being asked again, and what tone it was in which he replied *Yes Lord , you know that I love you.* Was there something of *Yes Lord, I've already told you that,* or was it a mystified *Um Yes Lord , you know that I love you.* *OK Tend my sheep.* Says Jesus.

Then it comes back for the third time. *Simon Son of John do you love me?* The gospel tells us that Peter was hurt because he had asked him a third time. *Lord you know everything, you know that I love you.* But was that all there was to it?

Everything in John's Gospel is deeper than it seems, and so I think it is with this story. The clue here is in the charcoal fire,

in Greek the *anthrakia*. They are standing around a charcoal fire and Jesus asks Peter three questions about his commitment to him. Have heard the echo yet? Wouldn't Peter have heard that echo by the time he got to the third question the same as the first two? Hadn't there been another occasion by a charcoal fire in the chief priest's courtyard when Peter was asked something 3 times, each one questioned if he was a follower of Jesus? In the end he vehemently denied it: *I do not know the man*.

Simon Son of John, do you love me? Simon Son of John do you love me? I wonder if you've remembered by this fire what you've said before? Simon Son of John do you love me?

Now Peter declares for the third time the opposite to what he'd said by the other charcoal fire. *Yes Lord you know that I love you. . Yes Lord you know that I love you. Yes Lord you know everything (including the previous fireside chat) and yet you do know that I really do love you.*

Despite Jesus knowing that previous fireside betrayal, he *does* know Peter, and his love for him, and his potential to be an apostolic leader, so what this threefold questioning does is to commission Peter to feed the flock, to follow him, even as far as sharing in the witness of Jesus, the *marturia* of a death in the service of his mission.

For Peter to be able to take up this position of leadership, or indeed we might better say, this relationship of leadership amongst the other disciples, about to become apostles, he has to experience what Rowan Williams calls **the Easter restoration**. [Let me acknowledge I'm following Rowan's way

of reading this story. I hope I'm making it more accessible!] Peter needs to be transformed from a betrayer into a witness and a leader, and as Williams tells the story it is not an experience of forgetting the past, but actually of remembering, and knowing the past for what it is in God's Easter power.

What Peter is discovering is that his past has been brought to mind again,. But not in the way it was before he had met Jesus that day. It wasn't a past which he was doomed to repeat, a past in which he would always be the betrayer. No. Now his past was to be remembered as a beginning not an end, an event from which he could learn and grow, and out of that learning and growth he would be able to lead others.

So Rowan Williams says:

What Peter may learn is that wherever Peter may find himself, however he may fall, his life is constantly capable of being opened to God's creative grace: God's presence in Jesus will not fail him. The inconsistent, vulnerable decisions and commitments of human beings, endlessly liable to destructive illusions, are set against the backcloth of God's consistent decision and eternal commitment, his everlasting invitation to and making space for his creatures. [*Resurrection* , p. 30, later edition]

That is the Easter restoration which Peter and all the disciples must experience: the discovery that when they meet the risen Lord, they are not simply betrayers and deserters, and certainly not so forever. Jesus meets them and their

memories of shame with forgiveness and grace, and new possibility for service. He makes them apostles, ones who are sent to preach not simply that Jesus is alive, but that Jesus still and always meets us with grace and mercy and love, to include us in his work and his life.

By the way, we also see this in the story of St Paul's conversion which we've also read today. You can draw the comparisons for yourselves.

What is true for the disciples transformed into apostles is actually also true for us. That is our calling as baptized believers, immersed into the reality of Easter, into the experience of the Easter transformation.

One last quotation from Rowan Williams:

The believer's life is a testimony to the risen-ness of Jesus: he or she demonstrates that Jesus is not dead by living a life in which Jesus is the never failing source of affirmation, challenge, enrichment and enlargement - a pattern, a dance, intelligible as a pattern only when the pivot and heart become manifest. The believer shows that Jesus is the centre of his or her life. And because this life is shared, because it is essentially, and not accidentally, a life of mutuality, that system of relationships which makes up the community of the baptized testifies equally to the presence of Christ.

Alleluia. Christ is risen. **He is risen indeed, Alleluia.**