

John 21:1 to 19 9.30 am

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord our strength and our redeemer Amen.

Our reading starts with the words, "After these things". These things were of course the death of Jesus, and his appearance to Mary at the tomb, then his appearance in the upper room even though the doors were locked for fear of the Jews, and his convincing of Thomas that he had risen from the dead.

It was after all those things, and more, that Jesus again showed himself to seven of his disciples at the sea of Tiberias, more commonly known as the sea of Galilee, but they did not recognise him because Peter said, "I'm going fishing." And the others said, "That they would go with him."

And they left Jesus on the beach for most of the night on his own; Jesus must have been saying to himself, "Heavens, that wasn't a very good start."

But knowing Jesus as we do, we can be sure that he either planned it that way, or was content to let them have fun and go fishing for the last time, and I think after all the trauma they'd been through, that they deserved that treat, and a time for relaxation, and there's a lot of that when there are no fish around.

This passage of course raises all sorts of questions of why they didn't recognise him, since they'd already seen him twice in the upper room, once without Thomas and once with Thomas.

We're then told that whilst they'd been fishing all night that it wasn't a success, because they didn't catch anything.

I used to go fishing off the coast of Dorset in a boat, and sometimes would come back with nothing, it happens sometimes.

However when they came back from the night's fishing, without any fish, Jesus, standing on the beach, told them to cast their nets to the right hand side of the boat, and then they caught exactly 153 fish.

Now why they did what Jesus suggested is in itself interesting. Professional fishermen, like any other professional person, wouldn't normally listen too, or take advice from, a stranger on how to run their business, but there was clearly something about Jesus' personality that swept a lifetimes experience away, and which gave them confidence to do as he said.

Now the reason why we know there were 153 fish, is I think, because there were so many, and that most of them were the biggest fish they had seen for sometime and which Jesus helped them catch.

However from the story it would seem that it was when they caught the fish at Jesus' instructions that John recognised Jesus, and when John declared it to Peter then Peter also believed that it was the Lord, somewhat reminiscent of John entering the empty tomb and believing.

From the story it appears that they initially recognised him not by what he looked like but by what he said and what he had done to enable them to catch fish.

Because directly they caught the fish John declared that it was the Lord.

And that situation is just as true today as it was then; we recognise the Lord in other people by what they say and by what they do, not by what they look like.

I now want to talk about why the story of a night's fishing was put into the Bible by John in the first place, what was it that was so important about the everyday work of fishing?

Firstly we need to remember that John, the author of our gospel, was of course one of the men who went out fishing that night, and it was he who declared that it was the Lord.

It was probably also the last time they ever went fishing together, which may have been another reasons why it was so important to John.

It was of course more importantly the time when John recognised Jesus at the lake, when Jesus told them to cast the net on the other side of the boat and they caught a huge amount of fish.

We are also told that the net didn't tear, or to put it another way, the net was able to hold them all, which still begs the question of what was so remarkable about that?

Let us look at Matthew chapter 4 verse 14 where Jesus said, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people."

I think John was making a positive connection between the fish they caught and which they took to Jesus, and the people they will bring to Christ in the future, and that when they do, there will always be a place for all of them, that the kingdom is big enough and strong enough for each and everyone of us, and metaphorically speaking, 'the net will be able to hold us all.'

In verse 9, we are then told that Jesus had already kindled a fire ready to cook some of the fish, and he sat down with them and they enjoyed eating freshly cooked fish, and I can tell you that when a fish is caught and cooked instantly there is no better way to eat it, it positively melts in your mouth.

But the important point to realise here is that visions or ghosts or apparitions do not sit down and eat a meal.

Jesus was not a ghost or an apparition when he ate the fish, he had a body, and when he appeared to them in the upper room, he had a body.

But I am probably the first person to say, that something's are too difficult to understand, and this may well be one of them, which is why we need faith.

If we knew for certain the answer to a riddle then we wouldn't need faith, but we don't know the answer, and therefore we do need faith.

Verse 12 is also difficult to understand and adds yet more mystery, verse 12 reads, "Jesus then said to them. 'Come and have breakfast'. Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, 'who are you?'"

It would seem from that, that although the disciples had recognised Jesus by his act of finding fish for them, that he was, when he gave the instruction, too far off for a visual recognition.

Because now that they had been invited to sit down together at breakfast with him, they didn't recognise him by his facial features, because we are told that they dare not ask him who he was, so how did they know that it was Jesus.

It was undoubtedly by faith, in the way he spoke, by what he said and how he behaved that they recognised him when they sat down to breakfast.

You see right from the very beginning even the disciples had to believe by faith, it was and still is by faith that we know that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, faith is the key to understanding, and that has always been the case even for those disciples who lived with him day in day out.

It is by faith that they and we know that Jesus is the Son of God, and it is by faith that they and we shall be saved to eternal life.

Moving on to verse 13, we are told that Jesus took the bread and the cooked fish and gave it to his disciples. It was Jesus who fed the disciples. And it is Jesus who feeds us as well when we turn to him in faith.

We are then told that this was the third time that Jesus had appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead, the first two times being in the upper room.

After breakfast and at verse 15 we come to a personal dialogue between Jesus and Peter, when Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love me more than these?" and Peter replied, Yes, Lord; you know that I do."

I think at this point of speaking to Peter, Jesus swept his arm across the whole landscape, which included not only the other six disciples, but included the sea of Tiberias, his fishing boat, his nets, and all his fishing equipment along with the comfort and wealth that his previous life of fishing would bring.

I think that Jesus meant his entire previous life, and I think that Peter understood that to mean the whole of his previous life as well, and Peter replied that he did love him more than all that. To which Jesus said, "feed my lambs."

A second time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" This time the question is more personal and direct, and Peter again affirms that he does.

We are then told that Peter felt hurt when Jesus asked him yet for the third time if he loved him, and Peter replies, "Lord you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep."

The first time Jesus asked Peter if he loved him Jesus was making sure that Peter understood that he had to dedicate the whole of the rest of his life to God, that nothing else must get in the way, it was to be a full time ministry.

The second time was a personal question, do you love me, and the third together is undoubtedly to allow Peter to make amends for the time when he denied knowing Jesus three times, which although there isn't mention of it, must have weighed heavily on Peter's conscience.

Attached to all the three questions of love are instructions to feed my lambs and my sheep. Peter's relationship with Jesus, and indeed our relationship with Jesus has a purpose.

Peter was instructed, and by inference we too are instructed, to tell other people about the good news of God, and that salvation is through faith and trust in Jesus Christ; that is our task, and to enable us to do that, God sent us his Holy Spirit who empowers us all in that ministry.

As we sit let us pray

Grant us gracious Lord that we may love and seek you always and everywhere. Thank you Lord Jesus for all the benefits which you won for us while suffering on the cross; for all the pain and insults which you bore for us in your love for us. O most merciful redeemer, friend and brother help us to get to know you more clearly and to follow you more closely Day by day. We ask this for your dear names sake.

Amen