

SERMON – 1 MAY 2022 – ACTS 9.1-20, John 21.1-19

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Two very chunky readings today, and both of them deal with people coming face to face with Jesus – we’ll just deal with Peter, in the Gospel reading. (Julie, who is preaching at St Eds this morning, went with the other reading – if you want her thoughts on Paul, they are on the website).

I always feel a closeness to Peter, not because I’m loud and impetuous and speak before I think, but because we share a name, and we share the name that Jesus gave him. A fisherman called Simon, and Jesus names him Peter, the rock, the rock on which I will build my church. I’m no fisherman, but I imagine a man fully involved in the family business, working long hours, working hard. I can imagine him seeing Jesus, believing in Jesus, and being willing to re-shape his life (and his marriage?) to follow that man. I can understand him helping to lead, being there, being involved – and sometimes saying and doing the wrong thing. I can understand him assuring Jesus that he would never deny him – and I can understand him denying three times that he even knew Jesus.

Take yourself back to the Last Supper - incredibly stressful. The atmosphere, the conversation about “one of you betraying me”, the departure of Judas, Jesus taking the Passover Meal and applying it to himself – this is my body broken for you, my blood shed for you. The disciples were not stupid, they realised the danger Jesus was in – they knew the danger they were in. This is not gentle Anglican church going – where you come if you want, and don’t come if you don’t want, and we have the freedom to do what we want – this is faith in Jesus which stands you against your religion and your society, and a society backed by the power of Rome. Are they going to stick with Jesus even if it gets dangerous for them? “I will never deny you” says Peter, and he means it.

Imagine the scene in the garden. When we share our communion on Maundy Thursday evening, we leave in silence, we leave individually, we leave without ceremony – and that is very moving, very meaningful. When Judas the soldiers arrived in the Garden and Jesus was arrested, this was not quiet and peaceful. Peter has a sword, and he uses it – he attacks the servant of the High Priest, cuts off his ear – you can imagine the pain, the blood, the screaming. Jesus takes control, tells Peter to put the sword down, and heals the lad’s ear. I wonder if Peter, who probably wasn’t a regular with a sword, pulled back, rather amazed at what he had done, certainly the adrenalin was flowing, and when he pulled back – it might have hit him. He follows Jesus at a distance, stays by the fire through the night – perhaps again, trying to get his head round what was going on, what he had done – no doubt wondering where all this is going to lead.

When he sees Jesus, a prisoner, beaten up, plenty of blood and pain – it all becomes too much “I tell you, I don’t know him” – you can imagine the cock crowing, Jesus looking straight at Peter, and Peter feeling – what had he done?

There is no mention of where Peter was on Good Friday as Jesus was being crucified. Did he go off by himself, did he go off with one or two of the others, did he find comfort in a bottle – we don’t know. He was a long way from home – grief, fear, what a day. Perhaps someone came and found him and told him Jesus was dead. On Saturday, the Sabbath, they should have gone and worshipped, but I don’t suppose that’s what they wanted to do. I wonder who took control – made a large pot of food and demanded everyone ate something. Did Peter do as he was told, or did he go off again, wanting to be by himself.

Then Easter Sunday morning – the women go to anoint the body, and find the body gone. As I’ve often said, we know what’s coming – they did not. People do not come back from the dead, so where was the body, what had happened – but then the women say they’ve seen him, and others say they’ve seen him, and Peter and the other disciples (minus Thomas) see Jesus too, and somehow they know he’s alive. But Jesus comes and goes – he may be alive, but he’s not with them in the same way that he was – and you can imagine that that leads to confusion, to questions, to doubts – it can’t have been easy.

At some point they left Jerusalem and went back to the Sea of Galilee, also known as the Sea of Tiberius. That’s actually a distance of over 60 miles – so that’s at least a three days walk. “Let’s go back to Galilee, Jesus will meet us again there” – or did it feel wrong to leave Jerusalem, or was it all confusing? “Let’s go back, go back to what we know, let’s go and fish” – it reads as if Peter can’t stand doing nothing and waiting for Jesus.

But a whole night, and there’s no fish – no doubt it wasn’t the first night when nothing had caught, but I bet it was a long, frustrating night. Someone shouts at them from the beach, but the disciples don’t know it’s Jesus. One sometimes wonders how thick the disciples can be – who do you think it can be?

Put your net that side, they catch fish, and realise who it is – they’re quick this lot. I love the line which has Peter putting on his clothes before he jumps into the lake. I have this vision of Peter reading John’s gospel and saying to his friend “did you have to include that?” They have a breakfast of fish – and there is something special in that. A long night’s work, they’ve met their Lord, their Master, their friend – and you can almost smell the food.

But how was Peter feeling? Surely he knew that he and Jesus needed a conversation – and it wouldn’t be the easiest conversation he had ever had.

Jesus doesn't say "I told you you'd betray me", he didn't give him a lecture, he doesn't say that's it, you failed. He asks Peter whether he loves him. "Do you love me more than these?" – that is what matters. Can you love, can you care, do people matter, will you feed my lambs, tend my sheep? Three times he was asked, three times he answered, and the relationship is healed.

The relationship will be costly – "when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, you will be taken where you do not want to go." This journey you are on will lead to your death – now if he said that to us, we'd all run a mile, we'd all find something else to do on a Sunday morning. It is worth reminding ourselves that many of the Christians around this world do not have the easy life that we have, for many of them persecution is part of life.

We also know that people in our church and our village struggle in life – we know about sickness, and loneliness, and the breakdown of relationships, and, and, and – the list can go on and on. And we do believe that a relationship with Jesus makes sense of life, brings you forgiveness, purpose, friendship, community, and life in all its fullness.

There is something amazing that Jesus uses Peter (and in the Acts reading he uses Paul). Both are men who fail, men who deny. And Jesus loves them, forgives them, empowers them, uses them – and they respond. None of us are perfect, we are people who fail and deny. But we are loved, forgiven, empowered and used. At the start of next month we will celebrate Her Majesty's Platinum Jubilee – we know that she is loved, forgiven, empowered and used by God, and we thank God for her faith, her dedication and her example. I'm sure I'm not the only one who is struggling to find much to celebrate in this country of ours' at the moment – my anger at those who lead us, and the direction they are leading us in, that anger often feels overwhelming. I must believe that that anger, that evil, is defeated by the power of the cross, and that God calls us to be people of love in an evil world.

So this May Day morning, we celebrate God's love, God's purpose, God's gifts, and the journey we all make together. Just look at our magazine, at an ordinary week's noticesheet, it says something about our faith – concern for a Food Bank, for Christian Aid, for the Ukraine – a coming together in friendship, and in a toddler group (bringing friendship to others). Coming together in music, celebrating the talents of young people and supporting our school. Bringing people together for the big events of life, and praying for them on their journey. And – most important of all – coming together in prayer and worship, for we journey with God, and his love transforms us and uses us. Just as he used those disciples beside the Sea of Galilee, enjoying breakfast together.