

Easter 3 2025 (4th May)

John 21. 1-19

A Sermon by the Rev. Raymond Hemingray

We have had a long Gospel reading today , and it is in three parts:

Part 1 (or perhaps I might call it Scene 1) - The disciples fish all night and catch nothing, until someone on the shore, whom they later recognize as Jesus, tells them to cast their nets on the opposite side of the boat;

Scene 2- Jesus offers the disciples breakfast on the shore; and

Scene 3 - Jesus tells Peter three times to feed his sheep.

In the first part of our reading, the Gospel writer, John, tells us: 'That night they caught nothing.' Experienced, professional fishermen go out in a boat at night, which was regarded as the best time to catch fish, and they catch nothing. A story of failure.

But after a night of failure and frustration comes a morning of help, hope and success. The disciples listen to an apparent stranger who is shouting to them from the shore, suggesting that they try once more by casting their nets on the opposite side of the boat. One can perhaps imagine the disciples thinking that, having failed themselves, they could lose nothing by taking the advice offered to them and trying once more. And they are rewarded with a huge catch.

We are given a very precise number for the fish that were caught. We are told that there were 153 large fish.

Many people think that John's Gospel is full of symbolism, allusions and hidden meaning, and there have been complex theories as to the symbolism of the figure 153.

But perhaps the simplest explanation is the one given by the fourth century theologian, St. Jerome (who incidentally translated most of the Bible into Latin - in the Bible known as the Vulgate). Jerome suggested that there were 153 known types of fish in Jesus's day, that the catch included them all, and the

number symbolized that one day all the people of all nations would be gathered in to Jesus.

In the second part of our story, try to picture the scene. As dawn breaks, the disciples see a man cooking fish on a charcoal fire on the beach. When they realise who it is, Peter jumps out of the boat and is the first to meet Jesus. His companions follow and Jesus does two things. Firstly he offers the disciples the bread and the fish that he has prepared. (He had fed thousands of others during his ministry. Now he was feeding them.) And secondly, he invites them to share what they have caught.

In the third part of the story, Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves Jesus. And after each reply by Peter, Jesus says, in three different ways, 'Feed my sheep'.

So what can we learn from these three little scenes?

As we reflect on Scene 1, the fishing turning from failure to success, perhaps we might reflect on any projects that we ourselves have been labouring over, and getting nowhere.

Like the disciples on the boat, we need to watch for the dawn, to look to the person who can tell us what to do, and to do what he tells us.

If we are ever sailing on life's sea, fishing for success, but finding ourselves struggling with failure, we need to remind ourselves that, metaphorically, Jesus is always standing on the shore ready to lift us out of failure, worry and despair, if we are willing to listen to him and follow his advice. (Prayer to Jesus isn't just about talking; it's important to listen as well, and to do what he tells us.)

As we reflect on Scene 2, the sharing of the fish for breakfast - Jesus offering what he has prepared for the disciples and also inviting them to share what they have caught- note that there is a reciprocal blessing. As one writer has put it, the blesser of the ones who have gone from failure to success, likes to receive a blessing from them.

So, if we are rewarded by faith, then we should be prepared to share the fruits of faith. This should encourage us, in our worship and in our work, to return to God part of the blessings he has bestowed on us.

There have been many sceptics over the centuries, who have suggested that Jesus did not really appear in the flesh - it was an illusion or a ghost. But I am sure that the primary aim of John in this story was to make quite clear the reality of the resurrection. A ghost does not make a fire, cook fish and share the prepared food with real people.

And finally, reflecting on Scene 3, one might ask why Jesus asked Peter three times if Peter loved him. Could it be that Jesus wanted to emphasise in a poignant way that he had a mission for Peter, notwithstanding that Peter was still carrying a burden of guilt for having denied three times at the High Priest's house, after Jesus's arrest, that he was a friend of Jesus.

This exchange with Peter could also be a sign to Peter of Jesus's forgiveness. Perhaps Jesus was offering Peter here, again in a poignant way, the opportunity to wipe out the memory of his threefold denial by a threefold declaration of love.

So, to sum up, Scene 1 is about faith, Scene 2 about sharing, and Scene 3 about forgiveness. The message for us all in today's Gospel reading is that, no matter what guilt we feel from sins past, Jesus is always wanting us to return to him for forgiveness, to start with a clean sheet, and to go out and share the fruits of our faith for the benefit of his Kingdom. Amen.