

JOHN 21. 1-19 Third Sunday of Easter 5 May 2019 Ascension

At Risen Christ's warning given by the women at the tomb, the Jesus team has moved home for most, 70 km to the safety of Galilee, to await their Lord. The disciples milled around in a puzzled fog as follows a bereavement, unsure what to do, awaiting further orders. It seemed to be another low point in the lives of these losers. They knew that Jesus was risen, but, where was he? Not a word, not a sign, not a glimpse of him for days.

Three years before, Simon Peter had been a fisherman, rash and brash. Jesus entered his life and called him to become a fisher of folk. Peter had boasted how devoted he was, but, when his sandal rubber hit the road in Gethsemane Garden, he led the rush of deserters to the gate, so abandoning Jesus to his fate. Yet, he did follow to the high priest's courtyard. There, Peter disastrously lapsed into denial that he was a disciple of the Lord, not once, but three times. How could Peter profess love of Christ and deny him at the same time?

In spite of his failings, Peter still held the primacy. Three days after Jesus' death, he threw up his hands and shouted "Enough of this! I'm going fishing." Some of his team had wives and children who needed to be fed, so, seven seasoned sea dogs went with him. Fishing was in their DNA. The experienced team knew where the fish shoals congregated. Or, so they thought. They fished the Sea of Galilee all night but by dawn, their nets and their stomachs were empty.

What is Peter doing? He has had sure proof of the greatest event in world history that Jesus has risen from the dead. Instead of planning how to begin the Christian conquest of the Holy Land, how to flood the land with the truth that the Messiah was no fake news, how can he become distracted and dismiss the magnificent power of the resurrection with "I am going fishing?" Has the failed night's fishing reminded them of their failure in abandoning Jesus to his fate in Gethsemane and on Calvary? Did any of them remember Jesus' words "Apart from me, you can do nothing?" [John 21.15]

Out of the foggy dew, by dawn's early light, the fisher-folk were hailed from the shore by a stranger who called them endearingly "Children." Who was this landlubber urging career fisher-folk to "Cast your net out to the other side?" Alone, they were fishing on the wrong side of the boat. Now, in a single draught, their empty net was infilled with an overflowing catch of every kind of fish, a preview of a complete world-wide community of believers, an image of the church of all nations to be gathered in. The suffering death on Calvary has offered salvation to absolutely everyone in the world-wide sea.

The Hebrew to "*drag* the net ashore" and to "*draw* it" is the same word. When Jesus was *dragged*, upraised on the Cross, he *drew* all to himself. Pastorally, that is our task to continue to draw souls to the Lord.

It was John, who had rested his head on Jesus at their last meal, John, who, stalwartly stood his ground with the women on Calvary, when all but he had fled, who cried of the stranger, "It is the Lord." At this, Peter, ever eager and impulsive, plunged into the water, perhaps to re-baptize away his recent failure, and waded towards the smell and the glow of a second charcoal fire, as Immediate pungent memories of Caiphas' courtyard rose with the smoke. Caiphas' fire had left Peter cold and distraught and full of shame. Ashore, a welcoming Jesus had set the scene to take the fallen fisher-folk back, back to the warmth of his first call at this same Sea of Galilee three years before.

Then and now, the disciples had caught no fish. Then and now, a landlubber carpenter told them where to cast their net. Then and now, they snagged a marvellous catch. Back in comforting surrounds after the turmoil of Holy Week, Jesus could re-jig the fervour that they had let flag and fail when he was taken and crucified.

On the sandy strand, camp-fire chef Jesus invited the emotionally-torn men to bring some of the caught fish for breakfast. Only days before, while huddled over a similar warming fire, not one, but three watchers had accused Peter, "You've got Galilean written all over you. You are one of his friends." In amazement, the watchers then heard the cornered brute let forth a torrent of shocking profanity, foul language denials he had not used in years. Three times, Peter actually blurted the truth, "I don't know the man!" Truly, he did not know Jesus. It was not to be Peter's day. By a terrible providence in the court-yard, Jesus, being led away, heard every blistering denial. His bloodied face looked up and met Peter's. Suddenly, the morning bugle, called the 'cock,' sounded, and a broken Peter slumped away from the fire, wallowing in self-guilt.

Now, days later, there was some unfinished business: Jesus had to let Peter forgive himself to change his failure into fruitfulness. Peter had to get himself unstuck from the adhesive fly-paper of guilt that entrapped him. Over the beach-fire and the frying fish, Jesus took Peter's memory back to his winter of failure to test the depth of his remorse. Jesus did not shame and blame Peter. He did not ask for repentance. Three times, Jesus had Peter renew the broken covenant. "Simon, son of John," (no longer Peter the solid Rock; *that* had powdered into dust). "Simon, son of John, do you love me and my church more than any other thing in life, more than the Holden Kingswood? Feed the young in the faith. I'm taking you out of the fish business and putting you in charge of the sheep business. Be a kind shepherd to my older church folk and pastor them to heaven."

What about us, who like sheep, may have gone astray? Have we betrayed a trust in our past life for which we now beat ourselves up over and over again, as Peter did? Do we, too, play the old negative tapes over and over again? Will we choose to feed the lambs of God with the food of the Word of God? When Jesus calls us to cast our nets again for a catch, do we murmur, like newly-minted curates, "Please let there be no-one at home." What would our parish ministry look like if we really, meaningfully, dropped our nets over the side? This morning, as I passed the Riversdale Golf Club, the true believers had their golf-buggy lights focussed on the putting green. If only we had that dedication and commitment! There is wonderful work to be done, and Jesus today reconstitutes you as the rock-like, loving instrument to do it. His final words to us today are "Follow me!" Will you?