

Sunday 4th May 2025 Third Sunday of Easter

FIRST READING: Acts 9.1-6

Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' He asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' The reply came, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.'

GOSPEL READING: John 21.1-19

Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. Simon Peter said to them, 'I am going fishing.' They said to him, 'We will go with you.' They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, 'Children, you have no fish, have you?' They answered him, 'No.' He said to them, 'Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.' So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, 'It is the Lord!' When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped

into the lake. But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off.

When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, 'Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.' So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, 'Come and have breakfast.' Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, 'Who are you?' because they knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead. When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my lambs.' A second time he said to him, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Tend my sheep.' He said to him the third time, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, 'Do you love me?' And he said to him, 'Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my sheep. Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.' He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God. After this he said to him, 'Follow me.'

Back when I was exploring the possibility of being ordained, I was asked a question. Who do you most identify with in the Bible?

My answer was Peter. Not because he was this great saint and apostle and evangelist; but because he got stuff wrong, and yet God still trusted him to be the rock on which this new community of disciples would be built. The call to follow Jesus remained, as it does for us, however imperfect we are.

Today's Gospel reading is a tale of new beginnings. And it is particularly appropriate because we are baptizing Stephen this morning. He has chosen to follow Jesus, and we welcome him to be part of a community of believers who have also made that choice. We're going to be hearing from him shortly.

But first, let's hear from Peter.

Well, back then we all saw Jesus, but somehow it wasn't the same. It was weird. He was supposed to have died. Instead, he was randomly popping in and out of locked rooms. And instead of being full of hope, we were just freaked out. And to be honest, I felt more than a little awkward seeing him. After all I had declared my undying love and faithfulness, only to deny knowing Jesus just a few short hours later. For once I had nothing to say. I felt ashamed of myself.

And what were we supposed to do next? All this beaming in and out of our lives Jesus was doing didn't actually put food on the table or money in our pockets. So, we went back to our old lives. It was great while it had lasted, and it was amazing that Jesus was still alive, but it didn't seem to lead anywhere this time. It was

kind of irrelevant. So, we fished. And that would be the story of the rest of our lives, or so we thought.

We put the boat out. And we fished all night, but the fish weren't jumping into the nets. Typical. All that effort for nothing.

Just like our lives really. There was no grand redemption for the people, no restoration of the nation. And definitely no kicking out of the bad guys. Yes, Jesus had said lots of amazing things, quite a lot of which we didn't understand. And honestly, all those miracles were also pretty cool. But now what?

It was depressing. And to top it all we had no fish.

Then, just when we were about to give up, we heard a voice.

"Guys, you haven't caught any fish, have you?"

"No", we shouted back.

"Try the other side of the boat!"

This whole scenario felt familiar somehow. We'd had a fishing lesson once before, right at the very beginning, when we decided to follow Jesus. So we gave it one last try. Stacks of fish, right on cue. Typical! We had problems hauling the net in.

"It's him!" John says. "It's Jesus!" Stating the blooming obvious as usual!!

Well, this time I was going to be the first there. I jumped in and swam to shore. And there was Jesus, sitting by a fire, cooking breakfast. "Hi!" he says. "Bring some of your fish and we'll have a barbecue".

I ran back to the boat and dragged the net to shore.

This felt a lot like a new beginning. It happened when

Jesus first called us. But this time it wasn't a stranger with expert fishing knowledge. It was our friend, the one we followed for 3 years.

Could this be the start of something new? Maybe, I thought, but obviously not for me. I messed up too badly last time round. I thought I could follow Jesus through anything. Yeah well, it turned out I couldn't.

Jesus carried on making the fish kebabs. He took the bread and gave it to us, and immediately we remembered the last meal we had with him. "This is my body" he'd said when he gave us the bread. That was supper, the end of the day. The end of everything. This was breakfast; and somehow it felt like a beginning.

Gradually we started to relax. A barbecue with good friends is never a bad thing! And the food was good.

And just as I was starting to chill out, Jesus turned to me. "Simon, son of John", he said. My full name. He had my attention. Was I about to be told off like my mother did when she used my full name?

"Do you love me with all your heart?"

I was a bit taken aback. I knew perfectly well that at one point I would have said a solid yes. Now I knew myself better. I knew that I was not very good at loving Jesus, or putting him first, or sacrificing myself for him. I was a complete failure.

"Yes Lord, I love you like a brother". That was more honest at least. It was the best I could do right then.

"Feed my lambs" Jesus said. OK, that was odd. Where was the telling off? Jesus still trusted me? I never expected that!

“Simon, son of John; do you love me with all your heart?”

“Yes Lord”, I said. “You know that I love you like a brother”. I was still doing the best I could, knowing that I was too much of a failure to love Jesus the way he loved me.

“Tend my sheep”, Jesus said.

Jesus spoke a third time.

“Simon, son of John; do you love me like a brother”.

Suddenly I realised that my feeble and failed attempt at love and commitment was enough. I am accepted and loved as I am, with all my failings and limitations and past mistakes. I was overwhelmed. This was extraordinary. Jesus, who loved me completely, through suffering and death, still welcomed, affirmed and trusted me.

“Lord, you know everything, you know that I love you like a brother”.

“Feed my sheep”, he said.

When Jesus met us on the shore that morning, he restored us; all of us. He took us back to the start, with the fishing lesson. He treated us as mates, not as cowards who had run away in his time of greatest need. He ate with us. He restored our friendship. And, once again, he set us on a new path in life.

This wasn't the end, this was a new beginning. Or maybe the rest of the story.

The call was still there. It would always be there.

“Follow me”.

The resurrection of Jesus was never supposed to be a comfort; or a happy ending to a terrible story. If we

think of it like that, nothing will actually change in our lives. We'll go back to our fishing nets like nothing happened.

The resurrection is a renewed call to follow Jesus, just as it was for Peter. To work together to care for the vulnerable and oppressed. To seek justice. To love our neighbour. To be agents of transformation in our world.

That will look different for each one of us. I can't give you a to do list! But what we can do is take a short time now to open ourselves up to God.

Let's pause for a few moments. If you feel comfortable, close your eyes, and become aware of your breathing.

The sun is rising over the water. The smell of fish cooking and woodsmoke is in the air. There is laughter

and chatter just a short distance away. And Jesus sits with you. He speaks your name. Do you love me with all your heart? he asks.

How does that make you feel? What might your honest response be?

And then, what does Jesus say to you?