

## Sermon for the Third Sunday in Easter

4 May 2025

The thread that runs between our readings today speaks about those chosen to guide the early Church. Specifically, Paul and Peter, and it shows them in an honest light. Their faith is not perfect, but they are willing to do the hard work that is required to live a Christian life and to put Christ's teachings into action.

I'll start by speaking about the Gospel passage, and then address the passage from the Acts of the Apostles.

In the Gospel we continue our series of encounters between the risen Jesus and his disciples. After last Sunday's encounter with Thomas and the Disciples in the locked room in Jerusalem, this time Jesus meets his disciples by the Sea of Tiberias. After the busyness of the city and the strange events they had experienced, I imagine the fresh air and the coolness of the sea would have been very restorative.

Before Jesus arrives to meet with them, the disciples are filling in time. Peter tells the disciples "I am going fishing", and they all decide to tag along. Given their former work as fishermen, this is unsurprising. After all, they may as well do something practical.

They go out in the boat that night, and catch nothing. Those who regularly go fishing will tell you that this is a normal occurrence. It happens ... may as well call it and sail back to the shore for a rest.

Around daybreak, they are going back into the shore. Someone is standing there. It is Jesus, but he's not yet recognisable. Jesus calls out to them, affectionately addressing them as 'children'. They confirm that they have no fish, and Jesus tells them to let down their nets for a last-minute catch. He convinces them, and they drop the nets.

And suddenly their nets are full of fish, so much so that they have difficulty hauling them all in. At that moment the Beloved Disciple recognises Jesus, and says, "It is the Lord!"

Peter is overwhelmed with excitement. I say he is overwhelmed because his actions are somewhat illogical unless you're very excited and a little impatient ... let's unpack them: he puts on his clothes (they were fishing naked because it was messy and sweaty work, and keeping their clothes clean would have been a practical consideration), and then he jumps into the sea so he can swim to Jesus. Peter arrives on the shore, soaked from his swim, but he is the first to reach Jesus.

When the rest of the disciples reach the shore, there is a fire ready and some fish and bread are cooking. Jesus asks for more fish and Peter rejoins the disciples to unload their haul of fish – all 153 of them. Even though there are so many of them, the nets (an expensive piece of equipment that would require careful maintenance) do not break.

After they unload the boat Jesus calls them to breakfast. He feeds the disciples a simple meal of fish and bread. This is the third time he's appeared to them, and each time Jesus has had words of encouragement for them, or done something to nourish their bodies and their souls.

After breakfast, it is time for Peter and Jesus to speak together. Peter denied knowing Jesus three times while Jesus was being interrogated ahead of his crucifixion. Peter felt guilty and ashamed when he heard the rooster crow after his third denial. Goodness knows what Peter felt when the meal was complete and Jesus began to speak privately with him, but I'm certain there would have been much going on in his mind and in his heart.

Three times Jesus asks Peter "do you love me", and three times Peter clearly replies "you know that I love you".

With each question, it is as if his denials are being wiped away. One. Two. Three. Three affirmations of faith to counter three rejections. Three sentences professing love to overpower three assertions that he 'did not know them man'. But it's not easy. Peter feels hurt when he is asked for the third time, "do you love me", but he responds all the same "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you". It would not surprise me if Peter's voice cracked with emotion during that third statement, as he spoke those words.

During this conversation, with each affirmation, Jesus gives Peter a task ... feed my lambs ... tend my sheep ... feed my sheep ... Jesus, the Great Shepherd is asking Peter to take care of his flock.

The encounter between Peter and Jesus on the beach is a wonderful moment of redemption and reconciliation. Peter, who denied Jesus and turned his back on him when Jesus was most vulnerable, is welcomed back and entrusted with a great task - the care and wellbeing of the early Christian community.

Peter being commissioned for his ongoing ministry has an important subtext. The Church needs and uses all sorts of leaders, and they can be fallible. Peter was imperfect, but he did his best. And leadership in the Church is something which is common to all believers - leadership is not something that only comes with a clerical collar.

Thank God we have a God who is willing to forgive us and bring us back into the fold and even to trust us to protect that flock. Even Saul (who would become the Apostle Paul), was called on the road to Damascus to change and to follow Jesus. In the passage we heard from the Acts of the Apostles, Saul goes to Damascus, "breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord" to persecute the Christian faithful. However, the Saul that arrives in Damascus will be greatly different to the one that set out bearing his letters of authority - he sees the light, hears the voice, and changes his ways. Like Peter, Saul is reconciled to God, and will serve as an apostle and an ambassador for Christ.

Thank God that all sorts of people are called to contribute their skills and abilities to, in the words of Jesus, feed and tend the sheep and lambs. May we take up that all, in the name of Christ, and perform our tasks to the best of our abilities.

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