

From fishers to shepherds

Remember the events of the first Easter? When the stone had been rolled away and the tomb was empty? Jesus is risen! He appeared to Mary... and then to the disciples. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul tells us of Jesus appearing to Peter *“and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.”* (1 Corinthians 15:5-8).

It is amazing stuff. Inspirational stuff. Except... what did the disciples do next? Well, we read this morning that they went fishing.

They went back to what they'd done before Jesus called them. They'd be firsthand witnesses of Jesus' life and death and resurrection –and then they went back to business as usual.

Verse 2&3 of today's gospel reading tell us: *Simon Peter, Thomas [...], Nathanael [...], the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together. “I'm going out to fish,” Simon Peter told them, and they said, “We'll go with you.” So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.*

Simon Peter, and the sons of Zebedee – James and John, had been fishermen before they began to follow Jesus. When they'd met Jesus, they'd left their boats behind and followed him.

Peter wasn't the type to sit around, so he was going back to do what he knew best – fishing – and the others decided to go with him.

But this particular fishing trip was not very fulfilling: All night long they had rowed all over the Sea of Galilee and would've had tried all their favourite spots.

But their nets remained empty. It was odd.

Peter, James and John had made their living as fishermen. What had happened? Had they lost their touch, after three years or so of wandering around with Jesus? Or were they just out of practice? If they couldn't fish how would they make a living going forward?

John tells us that night they caught nothing. They were disappointed. They were frustrated.

I can relate to how they would have felt. I think we all can. There are times when we do our best, but it just doesn't work. Or you've been working on something on the computer only to have it crash and when you finally got it back all your work had been lost. We all have days when it seems that nothing goes right.

So there's these six guys in the boat, having had an entirely unproductive night, and in the morning they see a stranger on the shore, and he shouts out to them:

“Friends, haven’t you any fish?”

It’s the sort of question that fishermen are asked the world over, every day. “Caught any?” “Are they biting?”, “Got enough for dinner?”

The men in the boat don’t bother with a long answer. Just a simple, and definite, ‘No’.

No explanation. No going into what kind of night it had been. Just a plain and simple “No”. They were not happy. They didn’t want to talk about it.

They had thought they could just step back in the boat and be able to haul in a reasonable catch.

And then this stranger on the shore gives them some advice *“Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some.”*

It is a bit strange that they listened to this stranger shouting at them from the shore... perhaps they were getting desperate? Why not try the other side? Who knows? Maybe it will work? Who knows, maybe the stranger knew something they didn’t.

So they listened to him, and two things happened. Firstly, they caught fish... so many that they couldn’t haul the net in, and secondly, they recognised the stranger.

The disciples might have remembered the time when Jesus had first called Simon – when Jesus had told him to cast his nets into the deep water, and had similar success – Luke tells us (Luke 5:1-9) that they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break.

John said to Peter *“It is the Lord!”*

And Peter forgets about the fish and dives in to go and see Jesus.

The rest of the disciples are a bit more cautious, row in to shore, towing the net full of fish.

Sure enough, when they got to shore, there was Jesus cooking some fish on the shore waiting for them. He didn’t say much right then but just asked them to bring a couple more fish for them to eat that morning. Peter helped the others with the catch, and they found there were 153 in the net (which does seem to be an oddly precise number).

And then they had breakfast together.

And then after breakfast, John records this odd conversation between Jesus and Peter:

“Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?”

“Yes, Lord,” he said, “you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Feed my lambs.”

Again Jesus said, “Simon son of John, do you love me?”

He answered, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep."

The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"

Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Feed my sheep."

Just to put that in context, back in John 13, Peter had boasted that even if all the other disciples ran away, he would lay down his life for Jesus no matter what, but after Jesus was arrested, Peter came into the door of the High Priest's courtyard, and John 18 records Peter being asked if he was one of Jesus' disciples three times:

The servant girl at the door said to Peter, "You also are not one of this man's disciples, are you?"

He said, "I am not."

Now the servants and officers had made a charcoal fire, because it was cold, and they were standing and warming themselves. Peter also was with them, standing and warming himself... So they said to him, "You also are not one of his disciples, are you?"

He denied it and said, "I am not."

One of the servants of the high priest, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, asked, "Did I not see you in the garden with him?"

Peter again denied it... (John 18:17-18, 25-27).

Despite promising to lay down his life for Jesus, Peter had denied him three times. Three times.

No. Not me. I wasn't with him.

And now Jesus asks Peter 3 times: Do you love me?

We lose a bit in our English translations here: Three times, Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love me?" And three times, Peter replies, "Yes, I love you." Only Jesus and Peter are using a different word for "love."

Famously, CS Lewis wrote a book called "four loves" based on a radio series he did with the BBC, which considered the different types of love, based on the Greek words translated as 'love' in our modern bible translations: Eros, romantic love; Storge, affection; Philia, friendship; and Agape, which CS Lewis translated as charity, but these days we would more commonly use grace – undeserved love.

The first time Jesus asks Peter, “Do you love me” (vs.15), He uses the word agape, a word which speaks of a self-sacrificial, self-giving type of love. In other words, Jesus asks Peter, “Do you love me enough to give your life for me?”

And Peter, with his three-time denial of Jesus still fresh in his mind, can only answer, “Lord, you know that I love you” – phileo, love like one brother has for another. It’s not the self-giving, self-sacrificial, unconditional kind of love that Jesus asked about.

It’s as if Peter is saying, “Lord, you know I like you a lot. I don’t know if I can honestly say I’d give my life for you, but you know my heart. I do have strong feelings of affection towards you.” Gone is Peter’s boasting, replaced with an honest admission of his limited love for the Lord.

Even so, Jesus says, “Feed my lambs.”

The 2nd time, Jesus asks Peter, “Do you love me” (vs.16), he uses the agape word again.

And Peter answers, “Yes, Lord, you know that I like you (phileo). I’ve failed you, Lord, and to be honest, I cannot say that I am able to give my life for you. But you know my heart. I do have strong feelings of affection towards you.”

“That’s OK,” Jesus says, “Take care of my sheep.”

Then, a 3rd time, Jesus asks Peter, “Do you love me” (vs.17). Only this time – the third time – Jesus uses the word that Peter has been using all along, phileo. It’s as if Jesus is saying to Peter, “Do you even have strong feelings of affection towards me?”

Jesus understood, and Peter responds by saying (vs.17), “Lord, you know everything” – On the surface, it doesn’t look like I even have strong feelings of affection for you. I denied you – three times - but you know my heart. “You know that I love you.”

And Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep.” Jesus is saying to Peter, “I know you love me, even though you have failed me, even though your actions don’t show it. I know your heart, and I still want you to lead my church.”

When Peter confesses his failure, Jesus affirms him, and that’s what Jesus wants all of us to do. All you have to do is confess our failures, admit our sin; and Jesus will NOT condemn us. Instead, he’ll confirm us as his own and call us into his service. He loves us anyway!

When Jesus first called Peter and his brother Andrew, he told them that he would make them “fishers of men” (Matt 4:19) but here at the end of John’s gospel, he tells Peter that he is going to be more than that – more than a fisher. He is going to be a shepherd to Jesus own flock. The three commands that Jesus gives Peter: Feed my lambs, take care of my sheep and feed my sheep – are the work of a shepherd.

From verse 18 *“Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else*

will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.” Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, “Follow me!”

Jesus is telling Peter that in time, he would show unconditional love, agape love, and lay down his life for Jesus. He would not defend himself with a sword like he tried to do in the Garden, he wouldn't try to save himself by denying Jesus, but instead, his love for Jesus would be demonstrated in self-sacrificing love.

And finally, Jesus issues the call to “follow me!”, a call which he makes 23 times in the Gospels. It is a call to not follow anyone – or anything – except Jesus. Jesus' call to “Follow me” began at the start of His ministry and he said it throughout his ministry; now as he is preparing to ascend to the Father, he gives the call again: follow me. Follow me. Follow me, even after I'm gone.

Jesus doesn't prod us forward or make us go somewhere he's not willing to go.

If we follow Jesus, then we can trust him to lead us through it all. He can see what's ahead because he's already there! And he can see what's coming up and he can help us avoid dangers and mistakes and help us to avoid drifting off his path.

Following him means that he's going ahead of us and he's leading us through our lives to the place where we should be, where God and his creation are reconciled. If we follow him, then we can follow him all the way through death, into everlasting life.

Jesus first called Peter to be a fisher of people, but here, after his resurrection, he called Peter to be a shepherd to those same people.

Jesus calls all of us to be fishers, sharing the gospel.

And he also calls all of us to be shepherds, caring for and spiritually feeding each other.

But most of all, he calls us to follow him. Today, and always.

Amen.