Sermon for 3rd of Easter Year C

Readings: Revelation 5:11-14; John 21:1-19

It is probably obvious to us all that the story of Jesus by the lakeside is no more about fishing and having breakfast than a wedding is just meeting the girlfriend on a date. As John tells it, the account is full of symbolic meaning.

There are 7 disciples who follow Peter to go fishing. Perhaps the number seven is supposed to be noticed as symbolic of completeness – is John telling us this is the task of the whole Church (despite the historical fact of there being 11 disciples)? Most scholars agree that there are 7 signs and 7 “I am” sayings in John’s Gospel, so 7 disciples seems hardly a coincidence. Is John telling us the whole Church safely reaches the shore and all share in the great catch of fish?

Is the boat symbolic for the Church – the nave of a church was clearly named to make the link with Noah’s ark which first saved the world and with the fishermen who became “fishers of people?” Is it also important to John that it is Peter who gives the lead – preparing us for what he going to relate about Jesus’s commission to Peter to “take care of my lambs?”

Let us examine what this passage is telling us about the mission of the Church which is about to follow this final Resurrection appearance.

i

At first the disciples see only an empty tomb, or Mary sees a gardener and those on the road to Emmaus see only a man who has been in Jerusalem and somehow isn’t aware of all that has happened to Jesus of Nazareth. It is with a measure of rebuke in the words of the angels at the tomb or in Jesus’ reproof of the Emmaus couple that the disciples do later recognise Jesus.

In this story we can see they are making progress. For the first time they recognise Jesus from a distance. They are now getting used to the fact that he is risen and beginning to recognise him: “It’s the Lord!” exclaims the beloved disciple. But he only recognises Jesus after he has instructed them how to catch fish again. So they weren’t yet that good at recognising Jesus.

This was to be their last sight of him before the ascension and soon they would have to discern Jesus’ presence without the benefit of a physical manifestation. As Jesus has already said to Thomas, “Blessed are they that have not seen and yet believe.”

The disciples are going to have to learn a whole new way of seeing Jesus. It is now going to be their task to help others to see Jesus in the spiritual sense rather than in the physical sense of seeing.

John, the writer of the Gospel, knows from later experience that the new way of seeing Jesus is a work of the Holy Spirit. John had an extraordinary spiritual sight of Jesus according to his Revelation. In Rev 5:11-14 John has a vision of Christ in heaven. He has been granted a sight of the final chapter of the story beyond the resurrection and beyond the ascension. And it is his duty to communicate what he has been permitted to see.

John’s vision was exceptional, perhaps unique. But it was granted to John for the benefit of the whole Church. Because John saw, we can at least catch a glimpse.

So too the Church is upheld by all subsequent visions of Christ which the Holy Spirit has granted believers down the ages. Spiritual recognition of Jesus comes in many forms. We have the way of the ascetic mystics of the desert; we have those who see Jesus in the poor; others like Wesley in feeling their heart “strangely warmed.”

Wesley spoke of the spiritual senses which correspond to the physical senses which he believed would come to life at the moment of conversion, allowing the believer to gradually grow in their ability to discern the presence of God and the leading of the Holy Spirit. The Class Meeting was the place to test out these inner experiences and compare them against the tradition of the Church, the teaching of the scriptures, the analysis of human reason and the analogous experiences of other Christians.

Whatever discipline a church may adopt to discern true from false religious experience, we must remember that being a Christian is not simply about following a moral code and seeking social justice (most religions do the same), nor is it about subscribing to a set of doctrinal statements (though that is a part, of course), but primarily it is about a **relationship** with God through Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Wesley’s famous quadrilateral requires all four legs: Scripture, Reason, Tradition and Experience. Push any one of those at the expense of the others and a dysfunctional faith ensues. Wesley’s contribution was to re-establish the authenticity of religious experience, the very heart of spirituality, when the culture of the time was elevating Reason above all else and threatened to eviscerate faith and leave it as a form of secular moralism and social conformism.

ii

The story of this post-Easter fishing trip is not intended to suggest that the disciples had simply given up on Jesus and gone back home. As already mentioned, the fishing trip is taken as highly symbolic by John.

It is believed that John wrote his Gospel having a copy of St Luke’s Gospel at least in front of him. In Luke 5 the disciples are called after Jesus instructs the unsuccessful fishermen how to throw their nets again and catch a huge haul of fish. Jesus then declares that he will make them, “fishers of people.”

John neatly uses the same scenario at the ending of the Gospel as the disciples are about to embark upon that mission. The Church is about to set sail.

Note that the lake is not now called Galilee, but called its Roman name “Tiberius” – named after the new city built near the lake by Herod Antipas by that name in honour of the emperor. The Church is about to set sail into international waters.

The unsuccessful toil of the night is overturned by the intervention of Jesus. John is telling his readers, who will know that many believers have been executed by this time, and John himself is exiled to Patmos, that despite working hard through the dark night and having nothing to show for it, we can hold on because Jesus will not allow the Church to fail. Ultimately, all our effort will be worthwhile.

Another point might be that we are being told that the success of the Church is not due to us and our skills and efforts, but due to the power and presence of Christ alone.

However, relying on the Providence of God is no excuse for making no effort. Aquinas believed that Providence was not about waiting on the Lord to solve all your problems, but depended upon active participation in God’s work. The disciples still needed to throw their nets in again. They still had to have put out from the shore. Their courage, effort and obedience were all part of why Jesus could bless their efforts with a huge catch of fish.

Wesley had a similar attitude to Aquinas in this regard. For Wesley, active participation meant availing oneself dutifully of the means of grace provided by the Church, especially Holy Communion; it consisted of making the effort to meet in fellowship at the Class Meeting, and it also included daily prayer and regular fasting.

If our net is empty the message is twofold. Keep up the hard work – that is a necessary prerequisite for any catch. Keep up the hard work because Christ will not allow the Church to come home with empty nets.

iii

The net was not broken. Despite the haul of 153 fish – the net was not broken. It is difficult, even if enticing, to make anything particular of the number, 153, but it stands for a large catch of fish. Augustine and Jerome are among those who have had great fun working out a possible interpretation. I favour the possibility that it is intended to stand for every species of known fish to show the world-wide nature of the Church’s mission – but that could be just fanciful thinking.

That the net was not broken suggests that the Church, symbolised by the 7 disciples in the boat, shall remain complete and shall not be torn apart. If that is the meaning, then we must acknowledge our obvious failure to live in unity. Even in John’s day, he would have known the Church had had its first squabbles and divisions in Corinth, Jerusalem, Galatia and elsewhere. The untorn net is an admonition to Christians of all ages. Perhaps John believed Christ still held the Church together in himself eschatologically, despite our earthly divisions.

Thinking of the untorn net as a symbol of unity is supported by the subsequent episode in the story when Jesus reinstates Peter to his leadership role despite his denial.

The authority given to Peter challenges both Catholic and non-Catholic alike to discover a way for the Bishop of Rome to exercise a Petrine ministry for all Christian communities – a matter various dialogue commissions are engaging in since Pope John Paul II’s invitation to help the Catholic Church re-think his role.

The fish and the bread have Eucharistic overtones. Note that Jesus gives the fish and the bread, in the same way he did at the feeding of the 5,000 and the way he gave the bread and the wine at the Last Supper. The disciples do not just help themselves. They are reconciled around the eating of this meal with Jesus, but it is Jesus’ role that is crucial, not theirs.

The hint we get in the Easter story of possibly rivalry between Peter and the beloved disciple is also resolved in this story. Peter went into the tomb first despite having reached it behind the beloved disciple because he assumes leadership – and yet he only sees an empty tomb. The beloved disciple who follows Peter into the tomb as a subordinate, goes in, sees the grave clothes **and believes.**  Such hints at rivalry which John includes in the Gospel are resolved in the closing verses of this chapter.

And all this takes place on the symbolic shore – an image picked up by Christian hymn writers through the ages. The meal is both a symbol of the Eucharist and also a symbol of the Messianic banquet in heaven after the Church has done its work and brought its catch safely in to harbour.

What is your role? Where do you appear in this story?

Well you are as one of the fish in the net. Graciously by the directing of Christ himself, you have been pulled from the deep. You are part of the harvest that Christ wills for his Church.

Yet you are not called to simply be a passenger – and here the symbolism breaks down somewhat – but you are also called to be one of the fishermen on the boat.

There are times for each of us when we are more fish than fisherman. But that we are called to be both seems pretty clear to me.

**Rev Dr Trevor Hoggard April 2015**