

Sunday 18 April 2010: Third Sunday of Easter

Recognising Christ in mission and action

Readings: Acts 9.1-6; John 21.1-19

Revelation, nourishment, action and love all form part of this early morning scene as Jesus comes to meet his disciples.

Revelation:

Imagine the wonder and the joy and soaring hearts as these seven disciples try to haul in this miraculous catch of fish that early dawn, after a despondent night where they have caught nothing; the struggle and laughter as they try to land this catch into their boat. It is in the midst of this that the Beloved Disciple, himself probably with both hands to the nets, in his amazement at their abundant catch, is struck to the heart with the realisation that it is Jesus who has been calling to them and directing them from the shore. What a beautiful moment to be caught by surprise, in the middle of activity, at the very beginning of a new day, with this dawning awareness, of Christ's presence with them, guiding and directing.

Recognising Christ's abundance and presence is personal. We will each have our own experience of knowing that 'It is the Lord!'

There were moments here on Easter Day that struck me; of the Easter light being passed at the early dawn Eucharist, of an amazingly packed church at the end of the day for Choral Evensong, of standing alongside Zimbabweans in this country outside their locked embassy nearby, in solidarity with those back home unable to celebrate Easter in their own churches; of meeting someone in the queue for the Easter breakfast who only a few weeks ago had seemed terribly despondent, now genuinely full of life and hope. And then simply, away from London picnicking with my father in the Peak District on a grassy hummock, listening to skylarks and watching them tumble and fall. Moments of knowing that Christ is with us, his presence woven into our life *with its* frustrations and headaches and times when we too catch nothing, and fly nowhere.

It is the miraculous catch that is the catalyst for the Beloved Disciple's recognition. For Simon Peter it is the word from his fellow disciple. For the others it is when they are invited to share the breakfast Jesus has prepared for them, with its fish and bread and actions resonant of the feeding of the 5,000. Recognition and awareness come in different ways and at different times and can be elusive, hard to pin down. Even when the disciples know it is Jesus they still want to ask 'Is it really you?' The Easter faith is something to be grasped and lived from the inside as we recognise, listen to, and act upon the presence and word of Christ in our midst.

Nourishment:

Jesus provides abundantly and also gives nourishment. This scene is similar to several of the Gospel scenes where when at first Jesus appears to be the guest, and later he is revealed to be the host. Jesus is the guest at the wedding in Cana but ends by supplying an abundance of wine; he asks the Samaritan woman for water but is the one who offers her living water; he is invited to eat supper with the travellers on the road to Emmaus in Luke's resurrection account but becomes the host as he breaks the bread. Here he asks his disciples if they can offer him fish, but he himself provides the miraculous catch and hosts the meal himself. It is Jesus hosting the meal that open *all* their eyes to his identity. Jesus is the one who nourishes and sustains. He is the life-giver, the one who gives the bread of life.

What stands out in this scene of nourishment at the beach is the simplicity and the intimacy of this meal that Jesus shares with his disciples. It is a picnic between friends – gracious, easy and loving and underlines for us the nature of the relationship between the risen Christ and his disciples and so the relationship between Jesus and the Church. God wants us to know that we are so loved by him that we are invited to the intimacy of a simple meal with him and that there we are fed in abundance. So often we approach with formality rather than simply slipping into our place at the table as his friend.

then..Action:

But when we are fed - what next? What happens after the meal? We are fed for action. The focus of the story is about how the early church could continue to carry forward Jesus' work. Peter is shown hauling in the net, and in the next part of the passage the commissioning of the disciples takes place. The verb used for haul is the same that Jesus used for those who come to God. Remember Jesus' words: 'No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father.'¹ And again.. 'And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.'² So Peter's action in hauling in the net is a sign of the involvement he and the disciples will have in the mission or action of God in Jesus.

Jesus empowers his disciples for their mission of fishing - for people - and now he feeds them to strengthen them for the task ahead. We are strengthened for our own individual ministries, whatever shape they may take. Jesus feeds us – he gives us strength and hope – and we are required to be fruitful and to extend that nourishment to others. The story of the breakfast on the shore cannot be separated from the commission that follows.

And so...Love:

Do you love me? - he asks of us as much as of Peter. Love is evidenced by care – it does not live apart from it. The Gospel makes it clear that the disciples are summoned to an act of love – to give up their lives – in a way that matches Jesus' own act - his gift of his life. When Peter answers Jesus three times, 'Yes, I love you', he is not merely paying lip service, he is pledging his life to Christ and so coming to a deeper understanding of the cost of it. Knowing he has failed, in his denials of Jesus, (around another charcoal fire), knowing he is forgiven, in the risen Christ Peter is re-formed moving beyond his previous relationship with Jesus. Impetuously at the Last Supper Peter had said that he would lay down his life for Jesus, but it is only now that he understands and takes up the call that will lead to this. The reference to stretching out his hands, an indication of the crucifixion he too will undergo.

For all the disciples this is a deeper call and commitment to love and serve than Jesus' first call to follow him. There is a deeper call because now there is a deeper understanding and love and a desire to share in his work of loving those who come to him.

Peter's call to feed the sheep is also a re-commissioning to being one himself, to follow, depending on Jesus the shepherd for nourishment and strength. Recognising Christ, being fed and nourished by him then in love called to serve *and to follow* is the dynamic of our Easter faith and a pattern for us to follow.

It is timely that our gospel reading today should be about a commission to ministry and action, called out of love. Today at the end of the service we will be giving out our Mission

¹ John 6.44

² John 12.3

Action Plan which will be launched at our Annual Meeting next Sunday. It is framework for our church's life and work over the next three years.

It is peppered with a call to action, growth and nourishment and a deepening commitment to the life of God and his people and there is a place for everyone to share in it. Along with our Annual Report it shows the life and richness of our life together and all that we hope for and look forward to.

What underlies all of this activity of the last year and plans for the coming few years is the need to recognise and respond to Christ's presence in our midst and in each other. Our love for God compels us to mission and action and care for one another and our neighbour. But with Peter and the disciples that mission and action can only be carried out by recognising and receiving from the one who provides for us and nourishes us. Mission and action and planning cannot take place without the love and nourishment of Christ that sustains and inspires it.

Surprisingly Jesus does not say as a sign of his love for Peter 'I love you and trust you' but he says 'Do you love me?' He calls out of him a response. And the answer to Peter's yes is to commission him. To love. To serve. To follow.

As we act and play our part in that loving service we need to make our own response to Christ's personal call to us...'Do you love me?'

If our response is yes and again yes, and perhaps again yes... then there will be no limit to what we can do, the abundance of the fish that can be hauled into the boat.

"For all that has been, Thanks. To all that is will be, Yes!"³

³ Dag Hammarskjöld (1905-61)