

Readings for the Third Sunday of Easter

4th May 2025

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.'

Second Reading: Revelation 5:11-14

I, John, looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, singing with full voice, 'Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing!' Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing, 'To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honour and glory and might for ever and ever!' And the four living creatures said, 'Amen!' And the elders fell down and worshipped.

Gospel: St 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.'

A Reflection for the Third Sunday of Easter

At Easter, and since then, our Gospel readings have focussed on Jesus' post-resurrection appearances to his disciples. He appeared in the garden early on Easter morning as we heard on Easter Day; on the road to Emmaus (heard on the Wednesday after Easter); to the disciples hiding in fear behind locked doors on the evening of the first Easter Day and then again a week later for Thomas' benefit, as we heard last week. Today, we have another familiar account. Although it is one we only hear once every three years in our cycle of readings, it is mentioned in our Easter Eucharistic prayer in the words 'greeting fishermen on the shore'.

Although today's story has some similarities with the previous accounts, not least that Jesus is not recognised initially, it is also a bit different. While the previous recorded appearances all took place in and around Jerusalem on Easter Day or shortly afterwards, this encounter took place in Galilee at some unspecified time later. It's as if, after the drama of the events that took place in Jerusalem, after the grief, the fear and the joy, the disciples are left wondering what comes next. How do they go on? So they go back to what they know best, they go home to Galilee and they go fishing. It's as if their lives have turned full circle and they are back to the place where they were when Jesus first called them – but not for long because, of course, in reality everything has changed.

They don't have much luck with their fishing, but then a stranger on the shore – Jesus where they least expect him again – tells them to try the other side of the boat, and suddenly they have this miraculously large haul of fish. The abundance they had seen so often in the past three years with Jesus opened their eyes to him.

This last chapter of John's Gospel is known the Epilogue, the counterpart to the Prologue that we are most familiar with at Christmas. Where the Prologue links the coming of Christ to God's plans for the world from the beginning, the Epilogue links Jesus' earthly ministry with what is to come, the future ministry of these disciples and the whole church, through the imagery it uses.

First is this great haul of fish. You will remember that when Jesus first called these disciples to 'follow me', he told them that he would make them 'fishers of people'. The fishing net symbolises Christ's church. Scholars have argued without any firm conclusion about the significance of 153 as the number of fish but perhaps it is best understood as indicating that many people will be drawn to Christ through the work of the disciples. That the net is unbroken is thought to represent the unity of the church for which Christ prayed, that 'they may all be one' (John 17:21).

Then comes the meal on the beach around a charcoal fire. The fire is reminder of the fire in the courtyard of the High Priest's house on the night of Jesus' arrest and trial; the fire where Peter warmed himself and by which he denied

knowing Jesus.

The meal of bread and fish is reminiscent of the feeding of the five thousand, another example of God's abundant generosity, and of Jesus' giving of the bread to his disciples at the Last Supper. So it also points forward to the Eucharist, the meal of thanksgiving that the church will share. And illustrations of early Christian Eucharists in the Catacombs in Rome also show fish as well as bread and wine.

And then, finally, we have the rehabilitation of Peter. Prior to this, Jesus' last words to Peter were to tell him to put his sword away after he had cut off the ear of the High Priest's servant in the Garden of Gethsemane. And Peter's last words about Jesus had been to deny knowing him three times in the High Priest's courtyard. For Peter, it must have been a devastating conclusion to their time together, as he thought. Jesus had named him 'Peter' as 'the rock' on whom he would build his church, but he had proved distinctly un-rock-like.

Here, Jesus reverts to his original name, Simon, to address him. Three times he asks 'Simon, son of John, do you love me?', echoing the three times that Simon Peter denied him. He is invited to put his faith into action, to care for and feed the flock of the church with the words of Jesus and the love of God. He is restored to Peter, the rock-like leader on whom the church was indeed to be built.

This is the last appearance of the risen Jesus that John records in his Gospel, but it is not the last that happened, nor the last that will happen. Some have encountered Jesus dramatically, as Paul did on the Damascus road, or as St John the Divine did in his visions of heaven recorded in Revelation. But these fishermen in our Gospel passage met the risen Jesus in the midst of their ordinary lives. And, if we see with the eyes of faith, we too will see Jesus in unexpected places in the midst of our ordinary lives. On the seashore maybe, or in the garden, or at a street corner. Sometimes Jesus will be hungry and cold, looking for money or food, or a refugee seeking welcome and shelter. But he may also be the one who invites us to share a meal unexpectedly, or offers a listening ear and words of hope when we feel bereft or anxious. Just as those first disciples did not immediately recognise Jesus, so we need to be alert to Jesus' presence among us where we may least expect him. Jesus is here in acts of kindness and compassion, where there is sharing and generosity, where there is striving for peace and justice, whether we recognise him or not.

Jesus' last words to Peter were the same as his first words to him: 'Follow me'. He has the same words for us. It's not an easy calling. The love that God has for us, the love that Jesus showed on the Cross, is life-transforming and self-giving; it sacrifices one's own needs for the good of others, and it's the love we're called to give in return. But, as this Gospel passage reminds us, Jesus meets us in the ordinariness of our everyday lives, he loves us as we are, and walks with us. And as his love pours into our hearts and helps us to grow, so that love also begins to flow out from us into the world, simply loving and serving others in the ordinary.

Jesus says to us all: 'Follow me'.