

01 May 2021 Easter 3

I know that many of you have got used to me starting off my homilies with an amusing story, but I'm not too sure that's appropriate today. I've tried to think of a lighthearted way to get your attention but like jokes about unemployment, none of them work.

Of course, it's extremely tempting to talk about me on this occasion, but that would be an indulgence that I am not going to take. As I always maintain, people who talk about number one are like self-mutilating cannibals – they're full of themselves.

What I do want to do is to talk about the gospel we've heard and the church. We have a gospel today that has a familiar theme from the resurrection narratives in it. There's a description of ordinary life where Peter and the disciples decide to go fishing and they catch nothing. And then extraordinary things happen, and they recognise Jesus. Yet it also stands out in the resurrection narratives for a less obvious reason.

Mark rings down the curtain on his Gospel before a single human being has as yet shared the news of the resurrection.

Luke gives us a memorable post-resurrection story on the Road to Emmaus that happened yet that first Easter day but then rather swiftly fast-forwards to an exceedingly brief account of the ascension 40 days later.

Matthew gives us just a handful of verses but you don't really notice how little Matthew gives following the resurrection on account of his presenting the soaring words we now call "The Great Commission." Still, that's all Matthew has post-Easter.

Not to put too fine a point on it but the Synoptic Gospels are thin on saying anything much about Jesus once he showed up as a living presence again after Easter. We have Luke's Acts of the apostles that fills in lots of stuff, but the Gospels end too soon in some ways.

Then again, the only thing that strikes me even more than the absence of post-Easter stories in the Synoptics is the presence of what John does

include. After all, in terms of reporting words or events that took place after that first Easter Sunday, Matthew contains 5 verses, Mark contains 0 verses, and Luke contains 4 verses. But John contains 33 verses, including one brief story that happened 1 week after the resurrection ("Doubting" Thomas's encounter with Jesus) and then an entire chapter of something that happened at an unspecified post-Easter time.

John wins hands down in terms of the post-Easter Jesus. And yet look at what he gives us: Jesus tending a campfire on a beach! The resurrected Lord of lords and King of kings is hanging around in an isolated stretch of beach and the last thing one might expect to find him doing in that remote place is frying fish.

You see, if we isolate this text, make it one pearl on a long string of biblical narrative pearls nestled right next to the Sermon on the Mount, Joseph's coat of many colours, and Elijah's chariot of fire—then it becomes just another in a long series of nice, cozy Bible stories. But I suspect this story will never disclose its deepest meaning to us until or unless we allow its oddities to shine forth.

Hence we can ask: why are Jesus' post-Easter words in some ways less startling than what came long before his crucifixion? In the post-resurrection narratives we get no more parables, no more sermons, no more walking on water or opening a blind person's eyes. Instead across the first dozen or more verses of this story Jesus says just some very basic things:

"Did you catch anything?"

"Go and try again on the other side."

"Come and have breakfast."

Nothing earth-shattering there. But what is Jesus doing here? Why isn't he in Rome lecturing Caesar? Why isn't he in Jerusalem telling Herod and Pilate the truth of what had happened to him as a result of their execution orders? Why wasn't Jesus anywhere else but that beach, maybe curing cancer, healing the blind, releasing some prisoners, making some crooked ways straight?

Even the spectacular catch of fish pales in comparison to stuff he had done before. Ever think of that? Consider: Earlier in John—as in all the gospels—Jesus took a couple of fish and a piece or two of bread and managed to do the amazing miracle of feeding 5,000 or so people. But now in John 21 Jesus goes to the opposite extreme: he feeds 7 people from a catch of 153 fish. Not much of a miracle to that feeding!! Why were the miracles before Easter so much more interesting than the ones after?

It's really no wonder that scholars have for centuries sought ways to spice up this little story by looking for symbolism and hidden meanings behind every little detail. Depending on whose commentary you read, everything may be freighted with secret meanings: the boat, the net, the water, and most tantalizingly of all for those on the hunt for secret meanings: the 153 fish. (My favourite on that one comes from no less than Augustine. According to Dale Bruner, Augustine thought this was a symbolic number arrived at my remembering that there are 10 commandments and 7 gifts of the Holy Spirit. $10+7=17$ and if you add the integers from 1 to 17 ($1+2+3+4 . . .$) you arrive at precisely 153. So there you have it: 153 fish = a symbol of both Law and Gospel!). It deserves (in the modern idiom) a double faceplant.

No, no, no. We are so desperate to imbue the resurrected Jesus with cosmic meaning that we do not remain content to let him show up in so ordinary a circumstance and performing so common a set of tasks. But when we think about it we really need is to see Jesus in exactly the everyday set of circumstances that John depicts.

Because isn't that where we need to encounter our Saviour, too? We don't need only a stained-glass Jesus who is other-worldly and who speaks words only meant for the holiest and most obviously sacred of events and occasions. We need a Jesus in the kitchen, "amid the pots and pans" as Theresa of Avila put it. We need a Jesus on the beach and at the office, in the car with us and while shopping in the supermarket. We need a Saviour who accompanies us on our everyday journeys, who sees us in those ordinary circumstances, and who speaks into those times and places, too.

So go ahead and heap lots of layered meanings and Dan Brown-like hidden symbols onto John 21 if you like. But I'm quite content with the Jesus on

the beach, tending a fire, cooking some fish, and saying to his friends, "Have some breakfast."

So where does that leave you as a church? Because it's about you that I said I wanted to talk. The fishing bit is interesting but I'm not going to make some cheesy line about how you need to be fishers of people. (Even though that is obviously true!)

Some of you may not know that my wife has for many years hankered after learning to fly fish. I eventually bought her a fly rod and all the kit to make a start. For those of you who don't know anything about fly fishing, let's just say that casting a fly doesn't come naturally to most people. Gillian describes her first efforts as 'waving at the fish'. And even when you're a brilliant at fly line casting, there's no guarantee you're going to catch. In the gospels we learn of Peter, and some of the other disciples as professional fishermen. They do it for a living! Yet we know the story; they fished all night and caught nothing. What made them carry on? There is a lot of preparation, waiting, and disappointment in fishing. And this is exactly where we enter this text — in a moment of frustration for these fishermen. They have been fishing all night to no avail. They are tired and disappointed. They just want to go home.

The Bourne with Tilford will be in an interregnum for the next few months, and whilst no great strategic decisions can be made, the work of the church will go on. There may be times when you feel as though you're tired and just want to give up, but the only word I can give you is don't give up and keep your eyes open for Jesus in the situations and world.

I am truly sorry that I have to stop being your vicar, but life and the life of the church here in The Bourne will go on. I will continue to hold you in my prayers and watch with interest what God has planned for you in the months and years to come.