

Dreghorn and Springside Church 18th April 2021

Bible reading: John 21:1-19

21 After this, Jesus appeared once more to his disciples at Lake Tiberias. This is how it happened. ² Simon Peter, Thomas (called the Twin), Nathanael (the one from Cana in Galilee), the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples of Jesus were all together. ³ Simon Peter said to the others, "I am going fishing."

"We will come with you," they told him. So they went out in a boat, but all that night they did not catch a thing. ⁴ As the sun was rising, Jesus stood at the water's edge, but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. ⁵ Then he asked them, "Young men, haven't you caught anything?"

"Not a thing," they answered.

⁶ He said to them, "Throw your net out on the right side of the boat, and you will catch some." So they threw the net out and could not pull it back in, because they had caught so many fish.

⁷ The disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Peter heard that it was the Lord, he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken his clothes off) and jumped into the water. ⁸ The other disciples came to shore in the boat, pulling the net full of fish. They were not very far from land, about a hundred yards away. ⁹ When they stepped ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there with fish on it and some bread. ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish you have just caught."

¹¹ Simon Peter went aboard and dragged the net ashore full of big fish, a hundred and fifty-three in all; even though there were so many, still the net did not tear. ¹² Jesus said to them, "Come and eat." None of the disciples dared ask him, "Who are you?" because they knew it was the Lord. ¹³ So Jesus went over, took the bread, and gave it to them; he did the same with the fish.

¹⁴ This, then, was the third time Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from death.

¹⁵ After they had eaten, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these others do?"

"Yes, Lord," he answered, "you know that I love you."

Jesus said to him, "Take care of my lambs." ¹⁶ A second time Jesus said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"

"Yes, Lord," he answered, "you know that I love you."

Jesus said to him, "Take care of my sheep." ¹⁷ A third time Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"

Peter became sad because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" and so he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you!"

Jesus said to him, "Take care of my sheep. ¹⁸ I am telling you the truth: when you were young, you used to get ready and go anywhere you wanted to; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will tie you up and take you where you don't want to go." ¹⁹ (In saying this, Jesus was indicating the way in which Peter would die and bring glory to God.) Then Jesus said to him, "Follow me!"

Sermon: goin' fishin' in a change of age

On this Third Sunday after Easter, we arrive at the third resurrection appearance of Jesus to the disciples. When I was a wee boy, I went to Arran on holiday. My memories are of a glorious summer, maybe it was 1976, all the same the sun shone. But this memory is not so glorious, far from it, it still haunts me. With my aunt in charge, we hired a colourful rowing boat and went out fishing in Brodick bay with a mackerel line filled with hooked feathers. It was a real adventure, until I caught one. That beautiful silver fish trapped by a hook, that had to be removed from its mouth, gasping for air I could not watch it die. My aunt instructed me to beat its head against the side of the boat, which I did, repeatedly until it stopped moving.

We were staying in a local hotel, so it's not even that I could take it home and eat it, so the dead fish went back in the water and my line stayed on in the boat. It was then I learned that fishing was not to be my thing. In today's Bible reading the disciples learn also that fishing is not to be their thing either.

The disciples find themselves at a place of change. They were uprooted from their expectations of what was going to happen when they followed Jesus, their hopes and their aspirations were dashed, like a mackerel on the side of an Arran rowing boat. Their dreams are broken, and so it seems reasonable, hollow but reasonable to go back to the fishing. Peter and another six decide to go fishing on the Sea of Galilee. All night they fish until they are tired, having caught nothing, the only thing gutted on that boat was Peter and his friends.

Sometimes the image of the boat is an image used to describe the church. And in the church just now there are many Peters and disciples who feel disheartened, downbeat, and generally brought low by circumstances.

We, just like the first disciples are in a place of profound change, I just can't stress this more often or more earnestly. The old familiar has gone, the church of the past is not coming back and tinkering with the edges will not make a difference. Quoting our Moderator in a recent Herald interview, statistically speaking the Church of Scotland will cease to exist in 2035, that is only 14 years from now, and COVID will do nothing but hurry this demise up. We don't like where we are heading and our current trajectory will undoubtedly take us there.

But this is also a place of opportunity. For when we are down and out of our own resources then that creates space for Jesus to step in.

As the sun was rising, these dejected, tired and hungry fishermen hear a voice calling from the seashore, "young men, haven't you caught anything?" "Not a thing," they answered. The voice went on, "Throw your net out on the right side of the boat, and you will catch some." Obliging they did, and they were rewarded, a catch of fish so great they couldn't haul it into the boat.

I wonder what would our church look like if we were to stop, to listen for the voice of Jesus and then throw our net out on the other side?

What would we find there on the other side? Maybe that's just what we are doing right now with the Towerlands Crossing Together Church plant? Might this new shared venture with Mure Relief be the other side where Jesus is encouraging us to invest our labours. Might there be rich blessings there? Might it be that instead of always going it our own way we can forge new partnerships with other congregations, other denominations, or community groups, all to see – that it's not all about us – but it is about seeing the Gospel, God's grace, God's love, God's peace made known, God's Kingdom flourish?

Peter's botched return to his previous life now becomes radically transformed. His fishing expedition becomes a new experience of abundance, mirroring Cana when Jesus produced just off the brim's worth of three large wheelie bins full of the finest of wine (2:1-11) and then of course there was the twelve baskets of food left over at the feeding of the 5,000 plus (6:1-14). The nets that had returned empty under the disciples' own reckoning now return full to bursting with a word from the risen Christ, who then prepares a meal for them. This "last breakfast" once again transforms a moment of deprivation and insufficiency into a feast, with unexpected blessing available for all.

Sometimes we're inclined to think that all this being the church, caring, loving, leading, organising, reaching out, making decisions is all our burden to bear. That God is passive and left us all to struggle along with it. That Jesus needs us to keep his show on the road.

But here we see that Jesus is more than able to provide, he doesn't need the great haul of fish, he has his own on a charcoal fire and plenty bread to share too. What Jesus does is he blesses with abundance. Just as he blesses us with a new day, the air in our lungs, his Word and the Holy Spirit in our lives. Yes, Jesus welcomes the catch, but he doesn't need it.

So, rest in his abundance - in faith we bring what we have in our hand, go with the flow of the Spirit he gives - it is always Jesus who provides, and it is Jesus who feeds.

This is a story of God's abundance and grace and so the attention now turns to Peter. Peter, whose three-fold denial at Jesus' trial (18:15-18, 25-27) and rapid return to his old occupation are now graciously redeemed and redirected in conversation with his Lord (verses 14-19). He now receives the grace of God in abundance. Peter is reinstated with three questions that mirror his three denials. "Peter, do you love me?" and assertions, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you".

We love our restoration programmes on the TV. There was that series Restoration, bringing old buildings back to glory and most recently there's the "Repair Workshop" on BBC bringing family memorabilia back to life.

This story of Peter and Jesus is a story of the restoration and repair of a relationship. Peter is freed from the brokenness and guilt of his past and enabled to begin again. We like restoration stories, so is there someone in your own life that you can help to be restored? Is there a relationship that you can repair? To enable you, and them to begin again.

Or maybe it's you who is in need of repair and restoration? If it is then Jesus welcomes whatever love you can muster from him. He will take this, like he took the water and made wine at Cana, like he did with bread and fish to feed five thousand plus in the wilderness, like he did when he turned around the lives of desperate fishermen in Galilee, he gave them a new future, and he wants to do this for you too.

And finally, the restoration of Peter wasn't just to restore him to his former self – it was more than that, Peter's restoration was for the present and it was for the future. Peter's confession of love for Jesus leads to his commissioning. "Take care of my lambs", Jesus commissions him, look after the little-uns, nurture the new flock. "Take care of my sheep", bring on, feed and enable my people.

This commission came to and through Peter, it is not limited to him, it is for us all his church, all who have faith and love for Jesus. Jesus repairs, Jesus restores and Jesus commissions. As the abundant grace of Jesus, our good shepherd flowed into the new shepherd Peter, so it flows now into you and me, as we too, each and every one of us, are commissioned to go bring on, feed and enable God's people, and to nurture the little-ones, and to raise up the new flock.

That is the incredible challenge in this time of profound and difficult change. But look, the early church grew through Peter's faithful restoration and his sharing of God's abundance. My prayer is that we too may be open to recognising this blessing that we have from our Lord, and then be inspired to share it abundantly with others.

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