



## Revd Ro's Reflection on The Third Sunday of Easter

### Year C 2022

Acts 9.1-20

John 21.1-19

I first started these Reflections on Easter 3 two years ago. I began to write them due to the closure of churches during the worst days of the COVID pandemic and I thank everyone who reads them and has found them helpful. Today's passages deal with two meetings with the risen Christ but they are so very different. I love the account of Jesus' appearance to the disciples by the lakeside; but in all the years I have been a priest, and in the years before, I have never done a sermon on it. I have though, talked on the conversion of Saul many times. My first memory of hearing of Jesus' appearance by the Sea of Galilee was at Sunday school and there was a lovely picture of it in the bible I was given as a child.

Last week the account was of Jesus' first appearance to the disciples in the upper room on that first Easter Eve. His first words to them were, 'Peace be with you.' The whole atmosphere in that reading is one of peace and restoration to wholeness, particularly with Thomas who, when confronted with the risen Jesus, hails him as, 'My Lord and my God'. Incidentally, he is the first one to do so after the resurrection. Before Jesus leaves them he gives them their commission, 'As the Father has sent me, so I send you.'<sup>22</sup>When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'<sup>23</sup>If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.' (John 20)

So Jesus tells them they are to continue his work and he leaves them. What now? is the question the disciples must have been asking themselves. How are they to do it, where are they to begin this huge task? At an ordination service the candidate is asked several questions about their future life and ministry, the answer to all of them is, 'With the help of God I will.' That is the point, on our own we can do little, when God is working within us we can achieve so much more for him. The disciples must understand they are not working in their own strength. Jesus has breathed on them the Holy Spirit. Later they will receive the power from on high at Pentecost, just now though they are still at a loss as to what to do.

<sup>21.1</sup> 'After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> Simon Peter said to them, 'I am going fishing.'

Peter sums it up with his statement, 'I am going fishing.' After that meeting with Jesus in the upper room they are at a loss so they do the natural thing, they go back to what they know, fishing. No doubt they return home too. So here they are on the lake, here called by its other name, the Sea of Tiberias. Of course it is a natural reaction to do this but as far as their commission goes they won't achieve much! That is reflected in the fact that they work all night and catch nothing. We remember this story appears in Luke five when again they catch nothing but Jesus calls them to follow him and he tells them will make them fish for people. Now, at the end of John's gospel, Jesus will commission them once more.

This account has a great deal of symbolism contained within it, as often with John, and I will look at this as we go through. For now the disciples are tired after a hard night's fruitless work.

<sup>4</sup> 'Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus.' Once again there is the question of Jesus' identity, that they didn't know it was him. We will never understand this fully as with Mary at the tomb or the disciples on the road to Emmaus. Suffice to say that John is specific, it is just after daybreak. We are also told that the boat is about a hundred yards from land. A figure in the morning mist about a hundred yards distant would not be instantly recognisable. That half-light is shadowy; ghostly, they could make out a figure but little more.

<sup>5</sup> 'Jesus said to them, 'Children, you have no fish, have you?' They answered him, 'No.' <sup>6</sup> He said to them, 'Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.' So they cast it,' No tired fishermen after a fruitless shift would throw the nets out again in day time, they were experts who knew that if you were going to catch fish the best time would be night. Certainly they are not going to throw the nets out again at the whim of a mere stranger. But they do just that without question. In their hearts they must have had the thought that this figure was none other but the Lord even if they could not see him clearly.

'now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. <sup>7</sup> 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.'

When they catch so many fish there is little doubt and John, who is closest to Jesus, knows it is his master. Peter, always impulsive, dives in to get to him first! I think it is wonderful that all the gospel accounts are quite clear in their portrayal of Peter as an impulsive, fallible man who is driven by a love for his Lord. He forgets about everything else, including the others struggling to pull the nets and boat to shore. His one desire is to get ashore and see Jesus.

<sup>9</sup> 'When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. <sup>10</sup> Jesus said to them, 'Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.'

Jesus already has breakfast prepared on, note, a 'charcoal fire;' we know that the last time Peter looked at Jesus across a charcoal fire it was at the betrayal in the courtyard! I wonder if the significance of this occurred to Peter. It certainly did to St. John. The question is often asked as to why the specific number of fish caught is mentioned. Lots of ideas have been put forward about this but St John does not explain it. It is lost in the mists of time, the point is it is miraculous and the disciples know it. Only Jesus could have done this yet still they are hesitant to speak.

'Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, 'Who are you?' because they knew it was the Lord.'

Perhaps Jesus' resurrection body was different in some way. Once again we are not meant to understand, the disciples simply know in their hearts and that is what faith is all about. That was the lesson that Thomas had to learn. Jesus breaks the bread at the breakfast beside the shore just as he broke the bread at the Last Supper and on the Emmaus Road. There is no doubt now this is their risen Lord and Jesus shares this meal with them too.

It is after breakfast that Jesus singles Peter out and takes him aside. We know this because later it says, <sup>20</sup> 'Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them.' Peter has denied his Lord and at the last two resurrection appearances Jesus has not turned to Peter specifically. He has said 'Peace be with you,' but I wonder if Peter had received this deep peace of Christ. We know that Jesus is 'the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world'; we know we are saved through the grace of God. We also know however that it is hard to forgive ourselves and we can drag that baggage around with us. I would imagine that Jesus knew that Peter was still haunted by the betrayal on that Thursday evening, still haunted by the weakness of his own fallible humanity. Jesus had said to Peter that he was to be 'the rock' on which he would build his church. It is no good expecting someone who is weighed down with guilt to be strong enough for the task. Jesus knows Peter must be restored and so he takes him aside and his words are so significant,

<sup>15</sup> '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.'

Jesus asks the question three times and each time Peter says of course he loves him. It is as if each question and response washes away each of the three denials. Each question is followed by the commission, 'Feed my lambs, feed my sheep, tend my sheep' It is not just 'I forgive you,' that is already done; it is, do something in my name. Go forward carrying your great commission in my strength! The task will be restorative. But with that commission comes the warning that Peter will suffer a martyrs' death, he too will be crucified like his Lord. He will come to his own pavement of judgement, but what a different Peter. This will not be the terrified man who denies his Lord but one who will stand before his accusers in the name of the risen Christ. He will, this time, face death for his Lord and God.

This is such a beautiful passage exemplifying the forgiving love of Christ for each one of us. We receive his commission too, go out in my name and live your life in faith carrying my love into the world.

The passage from Acts links so well with the final paragraph from the gospel reading.

'Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest <sup>2</sup>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.'

Already the persecution he speaks of to Peter has started, as Jesus knew it would. His followers would be required to 'take up their cross and follow' him. Anyone who followed Jesus and spoke out in his name was risking their lives. Here in this first paragraph we see Saul as persecutor in chief!

Later in Philippians 3 Paul gives the credentials of which he was so proud in the beginning.

'If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: <sup>5</sup>circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; <sup>6</sup>as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.'

In those days Saul was zealous for the Jewish faith. He had been taught by the great rabbi Gamaliel but unlike him he did not intend to show leniency to the Apostles or any follower of Jesus. As far as he was concerned these new ideas threatened Judaism and had to be stamped out. We remember the men who stoned Stephen laid their coats at his feet. Luke does not pull any punches. Saul is said to be 'breathing threats and murder.' This man is a terror and is determined to punish all who confess Jesus' name.

I said that these two readings deal with the appearances of the risen Christ but how different they are. From the beauty, calm and restoration of the early morning by the lakeside we come to a man breathing threats and an atmosphere of fury on the Damascus Road. Saul is going to arrest Christians in Damascus or so he thinks. God has other ideas! This appearance is also different to the previous passage because Jesus has ascended and Paul only sees the light of the risen Christ and hears his voice.

<sup>3</sup> 'Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. <sup>4</sup>He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?'

This is such a famous passage and even though we have heard it so many times if we imagine the scene it is earth shattering, Saul is literally prostrate beneath the light which flashes all around. Then comes the voice, the challenge, 'Why do you persecute me? It is unequivocal though Saul tries to evade it with his, 'Who are you Lord? But Jesus comes straight to the point.

'The reply came, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.'

Just as with Peter, Jesus gives Saul a commission. Jesus is totally in control. This is what you are to do and there is no beating about the bush. Saul is in Jesus' power.

<sup>6</sup> 'But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.' <sup>7</sup>The men who were travelling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. <sup>8</sup>Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. <sup>9</sup>For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.'

That is the command. Go into the city. I will control what happens and you are to obey. Saul is blind. He has been so blind to Jesus that he tries to destroy the church. That has been stopped, he is literally blind now but when he does see again it will be with the eyes of faith too. He will be proud to include himself with the apostles because he numbers himself among those who have seen the risen Lord Jesus!

I think it is worth pausing now and considering Ananias.

<sup>10</sup> 'Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, 'Ananias.' He answered, 'Here I am, Lord.' <sup>11</sup>The Lord said to him, 'Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, <sup>12</sup>and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.'

Poor Ananias, he knows what reputation Saul has, he knows his commission in Damascus. Now Jesus, in a vision, tells him to confront this terror. How easy it would have been for him to dismiss the vision as some kind of dream, to take the easy way out and dodge it, keeping himself safe. His reaction is natural.

<sup>13</sup> 'But Ananias answered, 'Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; <sup>14</sup>and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.'

The answer is clear; Saul is destined to do great things in the name of Jesus. When we feel unworthy we should think of Paul. Jesus chooses us to do his work and in his strength we can achieve so much for him.

‘Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; <sup>16</sup>I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.’

Ananias obeys his Lord, places his hand on Saul and he calls him ‘brother.’ The courage and faith of that man is amazing. But he obeys his Lord.

<sup>17</sup> ‘So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, ‘Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.’ <sup>18</sup>And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptised, <sup>19</sup>and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

It does not take long for Saul, ever the man of action, to go to the synagogue and begin to proclaim Jesus. We can imagine the reaction of the Jews. Here is the man who was supposed to be persecuting any who breathed Jesus’ name preaching of the risen Christ!

‘For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, <sup>20</sup>and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, ‘He is the Son of God.’

What a turn around. This is the mighty power of God. As we study the epistles of St. Paul, as we read of him in the book of Acts, we have to be amazed at the power of Christ. Paul becomes the ‘Apostle to the Gentiles’ as his Lord has said he would. He will suffer and eventually like Peter will die for his Lord. Both are fallible humans but both are chosen by God and give their lives to fulfil his purposes and by doing so, in his power, change the world!

We in our own small corner have received Jesus’ commission too. The commission is not just to preach the good news but to live it out in our lives so that others are drawn to him in love.

*‘Jesus promised life to all, walk, walk in the light.’* Francis Pott. (Trans)

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