

Fishing for Fish – Canon Neil Patterson

3rd Sunday of Easter (4th May 2025)

Acts 9.1-6, Revelation 5.11-end, John 21.1-19

Simon Peter said to them, “I am going fishing”

First of all, let me apologise for those sermon purists who feel that the preacher should, without fail, rise to the challenge of referring to all three readings. I am not going to talk about the Conversion of St Paul, as we usually term it, in the first reading. There is so much in that story, as indeed there is in John 21, that on this occasion it is going to rest and get considered another time. Our main engagement is going to be with our Gospel, coming as it does from a chapter which sits as a sort of epilogue to John's Gospel. In chapter 20 Jesus rises, appears to Mary Magdalen, the disciples, and most dramatically, a week later again with Thomas present, and the chapter ends with what reads like the end of the book, setting out why it was written.

And then this story appears, perhaps added later though there is no way of proving it – but is most appropriately set to be read now, as we move from the event of Easter to absorbing the consequences. And it gets going with this most unlikely sentence, ‘I am going fishing.’ Why unlikely? Well, it always feels to me as if it confounds our natural sense of what the disciples should be doing. Didn't they ‘leave their father and the nets in the boat’ and go follow Jesus? Maybe this isn't how you have ever thought about it, but as we follow Christ and the disciples around through the Gospels, it feels as if that is their whole lives – they have left the old behind and been drawn into the new life with Jesus, captivated by his message and personality. And this acts as a sort of paradigm for engaging with a Christian life – it should embrace all that we are, and come to shape all our thinking.

But for Peter to say ‘I am going fishing’ it is obvious that, even after three years' following Jesus (it's John's Gospel that makes that clear) he still had (a) a boat and (b) a net. And this invites a rather different sense of those years of following Jesus. And it may help to locate the disciples in society more widely. We know that in New Testament times in Judea, as throughout the ancient world, red meat was something of a luxury, consumed by most people only on feast days after the bullock or sheep had been ritually slaughtered as a sacrifice. Whereas fish of every sort was much more of a staple, and there was a well-organised industry of fishermen, fish salters (for preservation) and fishmongers conveying the fish from the Sea of Galilee to the inland city of Jerusalem, in a pattern found also around the Mediterranean.

So the conjecture (and there is no way to be certain) is that the whole Gospel setting is that of a group of friends involved in this business – fishing and transporting fish, well used to travel to and from Galilee and Jerusalem. When ‘the disciple whom Jesus loved’ that we identify as John was able to get Peter into the courtyard of the high priest where he could keep warm by the fire and be accused of being with Jesus, it would have been because they knew and liked John as the fish man who came every few months with salted tilapia.

Does this really matter? Well, it does because if the disciples were, as it were, part-time disciples, with their daily work unmentioned in the background. It makes them less like otherworldly spiritual characters and more like real human beings who had to earn a living and find a way through the ambiguities of everyday life. When we meet someone who is new to faith or growing in it dramatically, they probably want to talk about Jesus and ask questions about the Bible, and we don’t hear much about their daytime occupation in software development or fitted kitchens. But when Sunday praise of God and fellowship in church are over, it is back to the Monday to Friday where everyone goes back to living out their own discipleship.

And it is there, when Peter and friends are in the midst of their everyday fishing, that Jesus reveals himself. Not, as so often after the Resurrection, entirely obviously – John spots him on the shore a hundred yards away, but knows him instantly. Peter could perhaps not make him out (he may have been short-sighted, of course) but rushed to reach him. Whatever it is we do from Monday to Saturday, are we expecting Jesus to reveal himself there – in the kindness of a colleague, or a moment’s beauty of the sun through a window, or a sudden memory surfacing? We should, because he is there, whether it feels like it or not.

In the story there is much more from the Jesus who reveals himself – a direction of where to fish, and then the 153 fish that do not break the net (whereas the net does start to break in the equivalent story in Luke, before the Resurrection). Some commentators suggest there were thought to be 153 different sorts of fish, but at any rate, it is a sign of great abundance. It would be possible to make a dangerous metaphorical leap at this point. ‘Look out for Jesus in your working life; he will give you a sign what to do; you will make massive profits and get promoted.’ That is perhaps the worldly interpretation we could throw onto this story if we wanted to offer a rather implausible prosperity Gospel.

Instead, rather, we should look to the ways in which Jesus’ appearance is the opening up of a different, heavenly, dimension. The great catch of fish perhaps echoes the vision of a redeemed land in Ezekiel 47, which opens with the description of water flowing from the Temple. It provided the text for the chant *Vidi Aquam* that the Choir sang as we sprinkled you on Easter morning, and goes on to describe fish for all flourishing in the Dead Sea that is made fresh. And is it not strange that when they reach the shore, Jesus is *already* cooking

breakfast with yet more fish that he himself has caught before? And again and again the text says 'it is the Lord' (literally, 'The Lord Is') in a way that echoes Jesus' earlier statements that 'I am...' We are not in a scene where Peter & Co become the most successful fishing business on the Sea of Galilee. We are in a scene where the veil is lifting, and they can almost see the thousands of angels singing 'Worthy is the Lamb.'

Peter is not, however, allowed to remain basking in the sight of the risen Lord. There is work to do. As everyone has noticed since this text was first written, the three times that Jesus asks him if he loves him match the three times he denied to the high priest's servants – no direct reference needs to be made, but he is being given the chance to start again. And he is upset, because real forgiveness and restoration come at a cost, and the hardest thing of all is to forgive ourselves. Just after the text read is also that wonderful bit of discipleship teaching where Peter asks about the other disciple who is following, and told, in short, that it is none of his business. We are all better off for not comparing ourselves to others whom we *think*, but cannot know, are above or below us in the discipleship game.

And Peter's charge matches his experience, as should ours. There is perhaps an awkward jump in the imagery – sheep don't eat fish, at least not as far as I know! But Peter is told to feed the sheep, the lambs, of God's people who are now his charge. And he can do so because he has received in such plenty – not just the 153 fish, but seen the water into wine and the loaves and fishes of the 5000. God gives in abundance to those who seek and follow him, and so we too are called to share all we have from him.