

Affirmation of ordinary life

It's the immediate aftermath of Jesus' death and resurrection and his disciples are understandably in a state of shock and confusion. Their risen Lord has appeared to them in Jerusalem in the days immediately after the resurrection but now John shifts the scene away from the urban hustle and bustle of the city, to the quiet, rural surroundings of the Sea of Tiberias in Galilee. And there the disciples do what, we presume, they do best. 'I am going fishing', said Peter. And they said to him, 'we will go with you.' And there follows this beautiful encounter with Jesus: they fish – unproductively, Jesus appears on the shore, unrecognised by them, and he tells them to throw their nets out on the right side of the boat. And then this enormous catch, too big to haul the nets in. And Jesus is recognised and in no time they are all enjoying a breakfast of bread and fish round the fire. And we're told that none of the disciples dared to ask him, 'who are you?', because they knew it was the Lord.

So what are we to make of this return to their nets by the disciples, this escape from Jerusalem to their former surroundings of Galilee and their previous employment? Some have suggested that we see here a classic response to a shock or a trauma, when your world is in some way turned upside down and inside out. In a state of complete disorientation what you do is return to the familiar, to the known, to the safe in this case, fishing.

I think though that in the wider context of the Gospel story there is more to it than this. You see, since meeting Jesus the disciples have been caught up in a movement of God as they follow Jesus around and they listen to his teaching and they witness his miracles and they observe his conflicts with the powers that be. Many of Jesus' followers have left home and family and occupations to be part of this messianic movement that has been taking shape around Jesus. These have been heady, high-octane days in the company of the Lord. But now what is happening is what we might call a return to ordinary life, a return to normality. Back to home. Back to the nets. Back to the everyday, the mundane. Back to family, to work, to the pub, to the stuff of everyday life. Because this, for most people, is the story of their lives.

The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor is a masterful analyst of our contemporary world and the movements and trends that have shaped it, and he

points out one decisive development in recent history, what he calls ‘the affirmation of everyday life.’ Going back to the centuries before the Reformation Taylor observes that there was a sort of hierarchy in society whereby certain ‘higher’ activities were practiced by an elite minority. In different eras it has been the philosophers, or the warriors, or the statesmen, or the priests and the clergy who gained kudos from these elite pursuits, while ‘ordinary people’ did the menial tasks of lesser worth. It was, however, the discovery of the sovereignty of God over all of life that emerged from Reformers like John Calvin that abolished such hierarchy and affirmed the worth and value of all of life. This was in part bound up with the sense of vocation – if you were called to be a priest then that is your vocation, to be carried out to the glory of God, but that is equally true if you are a factory owner or a factory worker or a street sweeper or a parent or an artist or a musician. As Taylor puts it, the centre of gravity of goodness is placed in ordinary living, and there our concern is to increase life and to relieve suffering and to foster prosperity and the common good. And of course we recall that Jesus’ ministry was largely conducted in Galilee, not in the religious surroundings of Jerusalem with its temple. And Jesus gathered around him fishermen and tax collectors and not priests or scribes. And we recall that Jesus told stories about sowers out in the fields, and of women baking bread and searching for lost coins; and he taught in people’s homes and in outdoor spaces because it is in the grain of the ordinary and the everyday that God is found, blessing and enhancing human life. So I’m reminded of a quote by Martin Luther King: “If a person is called to be a street sweeper, they should sweep streets even as a Michelangelo painted, or Beethoven composed music or Shakespeare wrote poetry. They should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will pause to say, 'Here lived a great street sweeper who did their job well.'”

So this morning we gather here around this table. And our reading from the Book of Revelation this morning pictures Jesus enthroned in the rarefied atmosphere of heaven, surrounded by praise and worship. But our focus is not there. Our focus is on the Jesus of the beach, by the fire, sharing bread and fish with his disciples, exactly as he does here and now, with the common elements of bread and wine. And from here we go out to find God in the world, in the mundane and the ordinary, and we celebrate the affirmation of everyday life. And whatever task we are called to, no matter how seemingly small or trivial,

we do it rejoicing in our vocation and as an offering to the praise and glory of God. Amen.

O eternal and gracious God,
 on the first day of the week you began creation,
 speaking your Word,
 separating light from darkness,
 and brooding over the chaos;
 and on the first day of the week
 you began your new creation,
 calling Jesus forth from the tomb,
 banishing the darkness of death
 and the fear and despair of the disciples.
 And we gather here on this first day of the week,
 joining with all creation and all the heavenly host
 and crying,

‘worthy is the lamb that was slaughtered,
 to receive power and wealth,
 wisdom and might,
 honour and glory and praise!’

Yet always our praise is marred.
 Always it is tainted by lives that
 resist your newness and
 that cling to the old order of sin and death,
 God, forgive us we pray
 as we confess our sins to you and acknowledge our failures...

Come Creator, redeemer God,
 speak to us words of forgiveness and reassurance.
 Come, Lord Jesus, and as you met your disciples
 by the lakeside, sharing bread and fish,
 so meet us here is bread and wine;
 and com Holy Sprit and raise us up to new life.
 We pray in Jesus’ name and in the words he taught us, saying....