

John 21:1-19

It seems at first sight to be such an idyllic scene. Just imagine it: sunrise over the Sea of Tiberias, with the mist rising off the still lake as the sun breaks through over the hills, scattering a million flashes of reflected light over the water. And then there is this figure on the beach – offering bread and fish over a charcoal fire. Only – even better – this is the Lord, the risen One, keeping faith with his disciples, meeting them, and breaking bread with them on the lakeside. What a great way to start the day! Beautiful surroundings, and the presence of Jesus, and breakfast from his hand. We would be better people, would we not, if we could begin every day like that?

This scene, however, if we scratch the surface, is not quite as tranquil as it appears, for there is a darker side to it. Like some sinister secret lying beneath the calm surface of the lake, like some dangerous currents that lurk below, there are things that threaten us in this scene.

To begin with there are the words, ‘that night they caught nothing’ and what a world is revealed in those words. Whatever the beauty of the lake here is its contrary side, for this lake is unyielding. It does not respond to human efforts to harvest its depths. Human toil is pitted against obstinate nature and found wanting. Poor fishermen, trying to eke out a living, struggling for survival, searching to find some dignity in work, are mocked by nature’s intransigence. Here in a single phrase is humanity struggling in the dark against the odds and failing: ‘That night they caught nothing’.

And we find ourselves asking, Why is there so often scarcity in the Bible? Why is there so often famine, starving widows, hungry multitudes? Why are there so often people who are struggling against their limitations? Why is it that one way or another people in the Bible seem so often to be fighting for a viable life – and losing? Well, because that is our world. For far too many people that phrase ‘that night they caught nothing’ sums up the story of their lives. It’s a story of scarcity and shortages, it’s a story of fear and anxiety, it’s a story of defeat. And it’s a far too familiar story.

Then we move on, however, and now the net is full, so full that it’s too heavy to haul in, and Peter is in the water rushing to this figure on the shore who he recognises as Jesus. And then the disciples are gathered round a charcoal fire, so welcome in the still light of daybreak and there’s the blessed smell of food cooking. But again, there is a dark side to this scene, at least for Peter. For this charcoal fire on the beach burns into Peter’s mind, stirring the memory of another, recent, charcoal fire. Then it was not the dawn on the lake. Then it was the dark night in the high priest’s courtyard after Jesus’ arrest. Then Peter had denied his Lord three times – ‘I do not know this man!’- and now it is as if the beach opens up beneath Peter, revealing the abyss of betrayal, and this cosy, friendly lakeside scene is shot through with shame. The tranquillity is gone and we come face to face with failure, not this time the failure to catch fish, but the failure to love: Peter’s failure as a disciple to be faithful to Jesus.

And we find ourselves asking, why is that the Bible is so full of failure before God? Why is it that from Adam onwards, through the history of Israel, through the Gospel story, humans fail their God? Why do we fail Jesus, and indeed why do we fail one another? Why do we so easily let one another down? Because that is our world, our story. We are all Peter.

Then we move on once more to the end of the scene, and frankly the whole thing ends on a bum note. The passage that begins so enthusiastically with Peter going out fishing ends with the forbidden subject of death. ‘Very truly, I tell you’, says Jesus, ‘when you were younger you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you, and take you where you do not wish to go.’ There is the gloomy, dark end to this idyllic scene. Peter is confronted with what will be his premature, violent, martyr’s death by crucifixion: people stretching out his hands, and fastening him, and taking him where he does not wish to go.

And again we ask: ‘why is the Bible is so full of premature death? Why is it so full of human bodies being desecrated and made helpless by violence, and by disease, and by disability? Because that is us. The passage ends with death because that is how it ends for all of us. And pray God that ours will not be violent and premature as Peter’s was.

So this story, this lakeside scene has its dark, sinister side. You could say that is is the story of human beings on a losing streak. It is the story of shortages and scarcity and life against the odds. It’s the story of shame and failure. It’s the story of life’s plundering by death.

That, however, is why our eyes are drawn to the central figure, the stranger by the fire on the shore; that is why our ears are drawn to the voice that calls, ‘follow me’. Because he is the one who counters the threat. He is the one who faces down the fear and the anxiety, and puts death in its place. Just note how each of the threats here is met by the risen Jesus. To disciples who toil all night and catch nothing, he cries: ‘cast the net to the right side of the boat’, and suddenly it is full, full to bursting. And to Peter, haunted by his three-fold denial, three times Jesus puts the question, ‘do you love me?’, and do you see what is happening? Round that other charcoal fire in the high priest’s courtyard, on the night of Jesus’ arrest, Peter denied Jesus three times. But now, round this charcoal fire on the shore each weak betrayal of Peter is being countered by an insistent affirmation, ‘Yes, Lord, you know, you know, you know that I love you... This is Jesus reconstituting Peter, each denial being nailed by an affirmation. This is Peter’s restoration from shame – indeed his resurrection. And even those final words about death, about Peter’s violent and premature death are transformed. Because Peter knows that if that is to be his story, then it was Jesus’ story too. He too was stretched out, and bound, and taken where he did not want to go. Only here he is now, sitting round the fire, risen. Alive! And that too will be Peter’s story, of resurrection.

So Jesus, the risen Lord, counters the threats that lurk beneath this passage. Its sinister undercurrents are stilled by him. There is however one more thing that must be said. You see, the really crucial phrase that stands out in this story, the really key words that address us are the question that Jesus puts to Peter, ‘Do you love me?’ These are the words that above all hang over this story even as they hang over our world and our lives: ‘Do you love me?’ And the ‘me’ in that question can be very open-ended: do you love God? Do you love Jesus? Do you love others? Do you love yourself? Do you love at all? That is the question that probes us just as it probed Peter. Can we learn to love? Can love flow between God and us, and between one another, like the ebb and flow of the tide on Lake Tiberias? Can we learn to love?

A couple of things in conclusion. Firstly a quote I came across a while ago, by a Christian writer commenting on 9/11. She says this:

‘We human beings learn best to love when we’re a bit broken, when our plans fall apart, when our myths of self-sufficiency and safety are shattered.’¹

Those words hit me because this reading this morning is all about the shattering of self-sufficiency - a failed fishing expedition; and it’s all about Peter who had been broken by his denial of Christ. Yet out of that experience of limitation and brokenness Peter is being formed and fashioned in love. Could that be our story too? Could it be the story of this pandemic? Could it indeed be precisely in that place of broken-ness, that place where our plans fall apart, and where self-sufficiency and safety are shattered, that love grows?

An example that springs to mind... I wonder if some of you saw the recent film *The Two Popes* about Pope Benedict XVI, who resigned in 2013, and his successor, the current Pope Francis. In that film Francis, or Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio as he was then, has a darkness in his past which haunts him. During the military coup in Argentina of 1976 he had been faced with an impossible choice of either using his position in the Jesuits to speak out against the regime and its brutality, or to keep quiet in the hope of influencing the regime and ensuring the safety of his

¹ Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: a Vocabulary of Faith*, quoted in *Sojourners* magazine, Jan – Feb 2002, pp.26-28.

priests. He chose the latter, but his decision ended up backfiring in the arrest and torture of two of his priests. Borgoglio was accused of betrayal. In the eyes of some he became Peter, denying his Lord. One of those priests never forgave Borgoglio and died declaring him a traitor. The film, however, portrays an incident which profoundly changed Borgoglio, when years later he met up with the other priest and they celebrated mass together. One account states that after the mass they held each other in a solemn embrace. An eye-witness, however, says that they fell into each other's arms and wept: maybe that's how Peter felt with Jesus. Well, Borgoglio, by all accounts, emerged from that whole experience a changed man – the Pope Francis who we know today as a man of such extraordinary love and humility as he tends his flock. Francis, the current Pope, has followed Peter, the first Pope, in more ways than one. For both of them, out of failure, out of brokenness, came a heart of love.

Jesus' encounter with his disciples on the lakeside has its dark side for it is set in the real world. But it's an Easter story and so finally it is a story of hope. It tells of an Easter world of abundant grace and generosity when we catch nothing. And it's a story of a God who coaxes love out of brokenness and failure. It's a story that ends with the words of the risen Lord: 'follow me.' Amen.