

Northolt Park Baptist Church

Seeing Jesus – John 21:1-25 – New Start

With John 21, we come to the conclusion of the gospel, the conclusion of our Easter reflections on Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, and the conclusion of the time we've spent in John since Christmas.

In fact, we might have expected the gospel to conclude at the end of chapter 20. Verses 30 and 31 seem like a natural conclusion; but there is a further chapter to go. And that's important. It's important to note that the gospels don't end with Jesus' resurrection, but with the sending out of the disciples to continue the work Jesus has begun. Resurrection is followed by commission.

We're thinking about this chapter under the heading of 'new start' not just because it's a new start for Peter, but because it's a new start for all the disciples, and a new start for the next phase of the ministry Jesus has begun. It's important that John 20 is followed by John 21, then, because it outlines what is to come next, and that 'next' includes us as well!

Jesus is raised – but so what? What are the disciples to do next? They appear to be unsure, or seven of them are, at least – the ones named in verse 2 – and they're restless. Simon breaks the silence: 'I'm going fishing', he says, and the others go with him; but they catch nothing (21:3). They lack motivation, it seems, and they are getting nothing done. But Jesus reveals himself again, we're told in verse 1, and he gives three tasks to the disciples, three commissions, three new starts to people who would otherwise be fishing all night and catching nothing.

1. Fishing (21:1-14)

The first part of the chapter is about fishing. We know from elsewhere in the gospels that fishing is a picture of bringing others to Jesus (see Matthew 4:19). The Lord commissions his disciples to fish – not for fish, but for *people*. In the story, these highly-skilled fisherman

haven't caught anything (21:3). Jesus appears, but they don't recognise him to begin with (21:4). They have a conversation with Jesus while they're near the shore, presumably calling out to each other across the water while Jesus stands on the shore. At his suggestion, they let down their nets on the right side of the boat, and get a great catch (21:5-6).

The passage later tells us that 153 fish were caught (21:11). Some have seen significance in the number – 153. 153 is the triangle number of 17; in other words, if you add $1 + 2 + 3 + 4 + 5$, and so on, all the way up to 17, you get 153. But 17 is $10 + 7$. 7 is the number of perfection, but is also $3 + 4$. 3 is the number of the Trinity, 4 is the number of the church built four-square, and 10 is the number of the ten commandments. So, when the fishermen brought in 153 fish, it was to show that they were commissioned to preach the gospel to the whole world, teaching the 10 commandments, in the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, to build the church four-square!!

Or is it simply that they pulled the nets on the shore and said: 'What a catch! Can you believe it! I wonder how many there are?' And they counted them. It's almost certainly that. John doesn't seem interested elsewhere in his gospel in the significance of numbers, and he probably isn't interested here either. The point is to say that there had been no fish one moment, and then a lot of fish the next moment.

And that, in turn, directs our attention not to the prowess of the men in the boat, but to the power of the man on the beach – Jesus. And so the sign is ultimately an encouragement to the disciples and to us too. We will catch people for Jesus by hearing and obeying him, by listening out for his direction and following his lead. We might feel small and unsuccessful, and yet we can be encouraged to fish because *he* is the one who will provide the catch.

2. Feeding (21:15-17)

Right at the very start of Jesus' ministry and at the time of Peter's call, Jesus had got their attention with a dramatic catch of fish. And now he gets their attention again, no doubt, by bringing back that memory. No wonder Peter wades to shore as quickly as he can (21:7-8).

And when he gets there, what does he see? A charcoal fire (21:9). There are two mentions of a charcoal fire in the New Testament, and they're both associated with Peter. The last time Peter stood over a charcoal fire, warming his hands, he denied Jesus three times (John 18:18); and now Jesus makes him stand over another charcoal fire (21:9) and review old memories, three times over.

(a) A threefold confession

What does Jesus say in verse 15? He says, 'Simon, I was hoping that you'd be the first pastor of my church, but now I think you'd better just hand out the hymn books...' He says, 'Simon, you really mucked it up this time; I think you'll have to spend a few years in purgatory to work this one off...' He says, 'Simon, I *told* you so!' No, he doesn't say any of those things.

In fact, Jesus doesn't make a statement; he asks him a question. So, what question does he ask? He asks, 'Simon, have you read Calvin's *Institutes* this year?' He asks, 'Simon, have you held an important office in the church?' He asks, 'Simon, have you ever spoken in tongues?' He asks, 'Simon, do you do the actions to the choruses in church?' He asks, 'Simon, do you tithe?'

Again, no. None of those things. What really matters? What does Jesus really want to know? What is it that *really* makes the difference? 'Simon, son of John, do you love me?' That's crucial. Fundamentally, at the heart of Christianity, is a relationship of love with the Lord Jesus. The time for Peter to face his guilt has come. And the time to reaffirm his his love for Jesus comes with it: 'Yes Lord, you know that I love you.' Whatever else flows from his life will flow from his love for the Lord Jesus.

And Jesus doesn't ask once, or twice, but *three* times. Peter denied Jesus three times and three times Jesus poses the question. Peter probably knows what Jesus is doing, and at the third time of asking he responds emotionally – verse 17: 'Lord you know all things; you know that I love you.' And we know that what Peter says comes from the heart. He really does love Jesus.

(b) A threefold commission

But that's not all, is it? How does Jesus respond each time? He doesn't pat Peter on the back, and say, 'There, there, that's alright then.' He gives a command. A fresh challenge. A new commission. A new start. It's time to learn how to be a shepherd, time to feed the sheep. In fact, not *the* sheep; 'feed my sheep', says Jesus. Notice that – *my* sheep. They're not Peter's sheep, but *Jesus'* sheep; Jesus is sharing his own work, his own ministry, with Peter. Jesus is the Good Shepherd, and Peter is to be an under-shepherd.

And what is Peter to do for Jesus' sheep? He is to *feed* them. 'Feed my sheep, Peter. Take what you have learned from me these years and feed my sheep. Don't give them teaching programmes that are full of additives and preservatives; don't give them bland Bible studies or half-baked sermons; don't give them laugh-a-minute sugary-sweet homilies or overcooked ritual. *Feed* them, Peter. Don't entertain them. Don't give them what they *want* to hear but what they *need* to hear. Don't pander to their fussy tastebuds. Nourish them, Peter. Give them something of substance that will last, something that will make them grow strong.'

That's the result of his restoration, this new start. The threefold confession leads to a threefold commission – to serve Jesus by feeding his flock. That's why we need to think carefully and pray for ourselves as we think about what kind of minister we need in this church – someone who receives nourishment themselves so that they in turn can nourish the flock Jesus entrusts to them. It's feeding that matters: feed my sheep.

But this isn't just for ministers. This is for the rest of us too. Ministry is done by *all* those who have been forgiven by Jesus, who understand their personal failings, but who – like Peter – have been transformed as a result of meeting Jesus, who – like Peter – truly love Jesus, and who are now men and women who *fish* and who *shepherd*, not just 'netting' people for Jesus, but nurturing those who join the flock. Fishing and shepherding; netting and nurturing.

So, when we say we love Jesus, we find that it's not just a commitment to Jesus; it's a commitment to the flock! Jesus is so bound up with his people, that we can't separate our love for him from our service to each other. Jesus has already told the disciples that when he washed their feet and said they had to serve one another that way (13:14-15, 34). Let's not pretend with Jesus or with one another that we can enjoy a personal relationship with Jesus on the one hand, but not be concerned about loving and serving one another on the other hand. They go together.

Then, there's a third thing...

3. Following (21:18-25)

The chapter draws to a close with a call to follow Jesus (21:18-19). Ever and always, Jesus says, 'Follow me.' Those were among the very first words Jesus ever spoke to Peter. Now, despite all that has happened, Jesus says them again. We stumble, we fall, but he picks us back up and says, 'Do you love me?' 'Feed my sheep.' 'Follow me.'

The call to *service*, it seems for Peter, will also be a call to *suffering*. He doesn't seem too bothered about that in itself; he seems more bothered about what Jesus has in store for the others (21:20-21)! Peter was always comparing himself to others, and does so again: what about this man? We can see how Jesus responds in verses 22 and 23: he effectively says: 'Mind your own business!' He would say the same to us today. Of course, there is a place to be pleased for and motivated by the good we see in others. But we are called to follow Jesus in our own right, without comparing ourselves to others. Has there been a personal daily following? For those times we say, 'I

wish I was as popular as he is', Jesus might well say, 'What is that to you? You follow me.' Or, 'I wish I was happily married like her.' 'What is that to you? You follow me.'

And it's true for us as a church too. We might be tempted to think that it would be so much easier for us if our future was clear like that other church, if our budget was more healthy like that other church, if we had more people like that other church, or a nicer building like that church a few miles away, and so on. But Jesus might well say to us as a church, 'What is that to you? You follow me.'

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And so, the gospel concludes with verses 24 and 25. John's gospel begins with the Word being made flesh and living among us, and it ends with the disciples having breakfast on the beach with Jesus, with fish that Jesus himself has caught and cooked for them. And he gives his disciples a new start – a start that involves fishing, feeding, and following.

It would be too easy to make this all about us; it *is* about us, of course; but once again, as with the rest of the gospel, it's mostly about Jesus: we fish, but it's *Jesus* who will provide the catch; we feed the lambs, but they're *Jesus'* lambs, not ours; and when he calls, it's *him* we follow, in service and maybe even in suffering, but always confident that the one we follow will remain faithful to us – now and forever. Amen.

Notes from a sermon preached by Antony Billington at Northolt Park Baptist Church on 15 April 2007