

SERMON PREACHED AT SJH EASTER 3 YEAR C 5 MAY 2019

Last week we heard of two appearances, a week apart, of the risen Jesus to his disciples in a closed room in Jerusalem. Thomas hadn't been there on the first occasion, but on the second he acknowledged Jesus as his Lord and God. Today's passage is from the next and final chapter in S. John's gospel. Thomas is mentioned as one of the seven disciples present, but it's more about Simon Peter.

Today's passage doesn't sit very comfortably with what has gone before. The location is the Sea of Tiberias – another name for the Sea of Galilee. Many, if not all of the twelve (or eleven now without Judas), came from that district. Why, after Jesus appeared to them in Jerusalem, breathed the Holy Spirit upon them, and commissioned them to offer forgiveness, did they decide to up sticks, go back home, and not know what to do until Peter suggested some fishing? This, and other considerations, make some people think that this final chapter was added early on to the gospel which had previously been regarded as complete. It is a recollection from someone who had an eye for detail, like the number of fish caught.

Catching fish is a symbol for mission. In S. Luke's gospel, Jesus tells Peter that from now on he will be catching people, or as the non-inclusive chorus goes, 'I will make you fishers of men.' That passage has similarities to today's gospel: both involve the Sea of Galilee, a boat, a large catch of fish after an unsuccessful night, and Peter being commissioned. However Luke's incident is set at the beginning of Jesus' ministry rather than after the resurrection.

Peter had denied knowing Jesus three times. Now he is given the opportunity, three times, to declare his love for Jesus. As so often in the exchanges involving Peter recorded in the gospels, he doesn't fully understand what's going on, and is upset by Jesus' repeated questioning. But his heart's in the right place and he declares his love for Jesus. Three times, in slightly different words, Jesus commands him to look after the flock. I hope we find this encouraging. We may have let our Lord down – maybe not as spectacularly as Peter did – but he wants to restore us to his service. We may be misguided in our enthusiasm, but that's better than doing nothing. God will have us back and he has a plan for us.

Jesus begins the conversation with Peter with a question: "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" Who, or what, are these? We can't be sure. Maybe 'these' are the other disciples. But that still leaves uncertainty. Jesus may be asking, "Do you love me more than these others do?"

which would be difficult for Peter to answer. Or he may be asking, “Do you love me more than you love these others?” which is in theory more straightforward. How well does Peter know himself? How well do we know ourselves? A third possibility is that ‘these’ means the nets, the boat and the fishing tackle. In this case Jesus is asking Peter if he’d rather go back to being a fisherman, or if he’s prepared to follow Jesus with the particular vocation to care for other followers: “Tend my sheep.” “Do you love me, wherever that will take you, more than you love your previous existence?”

For Peter, following Jesus was not a single decision made on one occasion. He’d left his nets and followed Jesus three years ago. There were critical moments in the intervening period. Now Jesus is asking him again, “Do you love me enough to follow me?” This may be a question that we should consider from time to time, if only because the way we follow will probably change as our lives go on. God’s plan for a 17 year old will be different from his plan for a 70 year old in many respects. But each will have opportunities to participate in the church’s mission and to offer care to others.

In between the large catch of fish and Peter’s conversation with Jesus is the meal on the beach. This is full of associations. Jesus is cooking bread and fish on a charcoal fire; remember the loaves and fishes at the feeding of the five thousand, which took place by the Sea of Galilee. At that time Jesus described himself as the bread of life; on this occasion Jesus takes the bread and gives it to them. It’s a link to the last supper and the eucharist. It’s significant that although there is already bread and fish on the fire, Jesus invites the disciples to contribute some of the fish they have just caught. It’s an invitation to the disciples to join in what Jesus is already doing. It means that the work of the church in mission, in sacrament and care, is not something just up to us; rather, we are joining in what Jesus is already doing; joining at his invitation. He gives us a part in his work.

So this last chapter of John’s gospel speaks to Jesus’ followers in this age of his resurrection. All have their parts to play. Peter receives particular attention, but as foremost of the disciples, often their spokesman, Jesus’ words apply to his other followers too. We will do well to ask ourselves if we love our Lord more than anything else; if we will follow where he leads; and if we are helping to build up the flock for whom he died and rose.

fish – mission. Peter – care of church. Mission and care are related.
meal – reminds of eucharist. Jesus invites us to make our contribution to what he is doing.
Love related to following, wherever that may lead.