



A sermon preached at St Andrew's Parish Church, Headington

By Rev Dr Tim Howles

Reading: John 21:

Afterward Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Galilee. It happened this way: Simon Peter, Thomas (also known as Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together. "I'm going out to fish," Simon Peter told them, and they said, "We'll go with you." So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus.

He called out to them, "Friends, haven't you any fish?"

"No," they answered.

He said, "Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some." When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish.

Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, "It is the Lord," he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water. The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a hundred yards. When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish you have just caught." So Simon Peter climbed back into the boat and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, 153, but even with so many the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." None of the disciples dared ask him, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Lord. Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead.

There's a rather *watery* theme to our Gospel reading this morning, isn't there!

The disciples get into a boat to go fishing. Out on the lake, things aren't quite going to plan. They're having difficulties. They can't catch anything. But then, the risen Christ appears on the shore and tells them to throw out their nets on the other side. They do it. And this time there are so many fish that they could not hold them all. To use the old language: "they cast therefore their net, and were not able even to draw it for the multitude of fishes contained therein" (John 21:6).

What a story! But as we were listening, I wonder if it brought-to-mind something we've read before? For we've already had a story along similar lines to this one.

That story took place much earlier in Jesus' life: before the cross and resurrection, years earlier, right at the beginning of his ministry. We can find it in Luke 5. And the details are nearly identical. That time, just like in our story, the disciples got into a boat to go fishing. That time, just like in our story, they weren't catching anything. Again, Jesus told them to put out their nets. And the same thing happened back then, just as it does here: "they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break" (Luke 5:6).

So the two stories are the same, right?

But there's a crucial difference...

In the earlier story, how does Simon Peter respond when he witnesses this miracle? He says: "depart from me, Lord; for I am a sinful man!" (Luke 5:8)

Why on earth does he do that?

Once upon a time, I was 18 years old. I'd done my A-levels and was getting ready to go to university. And I felt pretty sure of myself! That's how it feels when you're 18, doesn't it! But then, I got to university. And I realised that everybody else was better: they were smarter than me; they'd read more than me; they had better dance-moves than me! All-of-sudden, I was seeing myself *as I really am*; not quite as great as I thought. And of course, it was not a comfortable experience.

Whenever anyone has an encounter with God in the Bible, the same thing happens. They see themselves for who they really are. And it's never comfortable. For example, when Isaiah sees the Lord he says: "woe is me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips" (Isaiah 6:5). Or, when Job sees the Lord he says: "my ears had heard of You but now my eyes have seen You; therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:5-6). And Peter here says: "depart from me, Lord; for I am a sinful man!"

To have an encounter with God is always to realise something about ourselves: we are all sinners. Sin is not just the naughty things we do (as if you could count up your sins on your fingers and say: *oh, they're not too bad*). Sin an attitude, an identity, a whole orientation of our lives, where we push away God as ruler and set up ourselves in His place. Like Frank Sinatra, we say: "I'll do it my way". We put our needs, our desires, our ambitions first—and God comes somewhere down the list.

If that's true, then is it surprising that an encounter with God, the real God, would leave us feeling uncomfortable? As the Danish writer Kierkegaard put it:

To stand before the holy God is to feel the self we have constructed for ourselves punctured with a pin and to experience a terrible earthquake of the soul.

That's what Peter understood. He saw Jesus' miracle and he realised that he had no right to come into the presence of a holy God. And so he was humbled. He was ashamed. He recoiled.

In our contemporary culture, I think we've lost a sense of that, don't you? Most people, especially young people, I reckon, seem to think that God is lucky to have us! But the first step to becoming a Christian is to recognise, just as Peter does, that because of our sin we have no right to come into the presence of a holy God. "When you keep a record of our wrongs", says the Psalmist, "who then will be able to stand?" (Ps 130:3).

But let's go back to our story in John 21. As we said at the beginning, the details are identical: the disciples, the boat, the fishing. Jesus tells them to cast out their nets and the same miracle takes place. But this time, there's a different reaction from Peter:

As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, 'it is the Lord', he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water. (John 21:7)

A while back, we went to a leisure-centre swimming pool with our children. Our little boy William is a very confident swimmer. But perhaps a little too confident... We were paddling around with them, but then we must have turned our backs for a moment, and William ducked under the water. But the lifeguard was watching. And he was worried. And he bounded off his chair and came running to the edge of the pool. Just in time for William to bob back up again above the water with the look of "what's the fuss about?" But it was too late for the lifeguard. He tried to stop. But his momentum was such that he couldn't prevent himself tumbling into the pool, complete with comedy flapping arms! He was not very impressed!

Nothing like that for Peter! This time, when he sees the risen Christ, he "jumps" in the water. And it's a very active word: we might say that Peter "leapt", "bounded" or "plunged" into the water. And he swims and he splashes, as fast as he can, to get back to the shore, to embrace his Saviour.

In the first story, when Peter had an encounter with Christ, he recoiled. This time, when he has the same encounter, he leaps into the water with all his energy.

So what's changed?

At the heart of Christianity is the message that, through the death and resurrection of Christ, our sins are dealt with forever. We have no right to stand before God. But because of His grace, because of what Jesus has done, we are invited to come into His presence, forgiven, liberated, free. It doesn't matter who you are; it doesn't matter where you've come from; it doesn't matter what you've done. A new start is offered to you. If you come to Him, then

your sins will be taken away, as far as the east is from the west. “Christ suffered for our sins, once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring us back to God” (1 Peter 3:18).

That’s why Peter leapt into the water. He knew Jesus as his Lord *and* Saviour.

So my challenge to all of us this morning is: which story are we in? Are we in the first story, encountering God with fear and trembling, ashamed, recoiling, on account of our sin? Or are we in the second story? Like Peter, do we know the unconditional forgiveness of the risen Christ? Do we understand that, because of His grace, we can now come close to Him? Do we know that nothing can ever separate us from his love, world without end?

Just think how knowing that would change our lives! Think what it would do to our relationships; think what it would mean for the way we spend our time and money; think how it would put into perspective our fears and anxieties. All this is available to us now in Christ. Well then: jump into the water; wade, splash, swim however you can to embrace Him as your Lord and Saviour.

Let us pray.

Sermon preached on Sunday 05 March, 2019