

North Kildonan United Church

1st May 2022 ~Rev. Don Johnson

Acts 9: 1-6

Revelation 5: 11-14

John 21: 1-19

Gracious God, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit, that we may hear your Word with joy. Amen.

When you hear the names of various Biblical characters, what comes to mind? Think for instance of Peter. We often hear of him in the gospels, usually as the disciple who speaks out of turn, who misunderstands the teachings of Jesus, and perhaps ultimately, as the one who betrays Jesus three times. There's something relatable about Peter for most of us. Who of us has not on occasion misunderstood Jesus's teachings, or has failed to live up to our calling as disciples of Jesus, or in our own way have felt that through our words or actions or attitudes we have betrayed Jesus? With all of his shortcomings, we can certainly relate to Peter, and like him, we trust in God's forgiveness for all those times when we miss the mark, say the wrong thing and do the wrong thing. But there is something lovable about this impulsive, hardworking fisherman, something honest about his willingness to say yes before he's had the chance to consider all the options and weigh the various opinions and calculate the odds.

Think of today's account. Peter and the gang are fishing, or at least trying to catch some fish, yet to no avail. In an account reminiscent of a time before the crucifixion and resurrection, the nets are cast but no fish go near them.

As they cast and recast the nets, what did they talk about? Surely it was more than the weather, though weather is always important to those who fish large waters. There probably wasn't much discussion about the absence of fish. All of them would have had on their minds and in their hearts the recent events when the Risen Lord had appeared to them. Thomas, currently fishing with Peter and the others, would have fresh in his mind how Jesus put aside the doubts Thomas had. Perhaps still ringing in his ears were the words Jesus said to him: *"Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe."*

There was so much for those disciples to talk about, to think about, to ponder and to wonder what it all meant. Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene after Peter and John had run to the tomb and discovered it empty. She told them of her encounter with the one who she thought was the gardener, and that certainly generated much conversation and perhaps some questioning.

Then later that day, that evening actually, some of the disciples gathered with a certain degree of fear of being caught as followers of Jesus. As they huddled together with the door locked, into their midst Jesus appears, showing them his wounds and greeting them with "Peace be with you." What joy and elation they must have felt. And then the following week, as they gathered together again, this time with Thomas

included, Jesus personally addressed Thomas's doubts. Though of course Jesus was also addressing the doubts of all who were in the room that time, and of all who would come afterwards, including us. What was it that Jesus said to Thomas: 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'

With all that had happened in such a short period of time, what else could they talk about? The reality of their friend, their teacher, their Lord Jesus risen from the dead, surely that was on their minds every waking minute.

As they pondered all these events, all the words of peace and reassurance, as they talked about how they felt when they saw and spoke with Jesus, once dead but now alive, there must have been another dimension to their thoughts and words. Yes, Jesus is alive, yes he has visited us, but what comes next, they may have thought. What's this actually all about?

So, like men and women through the ages, when they have time on their hands or questions in their minds, they go fishing. Golf hadn't been invented yet.

At the invitation of Simon Peter, or Peter as we know him, Thomas, Nathanael, the sons of Zebedee and two other disciples go fishing on the Sea of Tiberius.

They cast their nets, and even though they caught nothing it still helped quiet their thoughts and redirect some of their energy.

And then, as if out of the blue, a man appears on the shore and suggests they cast their nets in a different direction. As we heard, this man was the Risen Jesus, and that suggested fishing spot yielded a vast array of fish.

With such a successful catch they make their way back to shore, where they find a wonderful barbeque prepared for them. Fish and bread is the breakfast Jesus has prepared for them, and as he had done before, and as his followers will continue to do down through the ages to the present day, Jesus takes bread, breaks it and gives it to his friends.

After this hearty breakfast, Jesus turns to Peter and puts the question to him. 'Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.'

Jesus says to him, 'Feed my lambs.'

The question is put to Peter two more times, each time followed by an instruction of what to do: "*tend my sheep*", "*feed my sheep*". By the end of the third time Peter is feeling more than a bit hurt and upset by Jesus's apparent doubt in Peter's sincerity to prove his love through action.

But of course that is not it at all. Jesus wants Peter and all others who will call themselves disciples to realize the cost of discipleship. A cost that for many means sacrificing the comforts of home, a place in society, secure employment, indeed for the holy martyrs, the cost is their very life. As in time Peter and the disciples will discover

during their spreading of the gospel to the reaches of the known world.

Think of the power of these concluding words of Jesus:

“Very truly, I tell you, 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.” (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he, Peter, would glorify God.) After this he said to him, “Follow me.”

But there is more to the three questions. Jesus predicted that Peter would betray him three times. Those questions are three reminders of those three denials, sins which Jesus has taken away, even as the smell of the charcoal barbecue fire reminds Peter of the charcoal fire he warmed himself beside as denied known Jesus. But Jesus puts forgiveness into action as he calls upon Peter to be a shepherd to the people he will care for, Peter who at the last would become the first Pope. In a sense what Jesus has done for Peter is to help Peter release the inner pain of his betrayal and accept a commission to care for others in Jesus’s name.

Let’s end with these words from Tom Wright.

“Here is the secret of all Christian ministry, yours and mine, lay and ordained, full-time or part-time. It’s the secret of everything from being a quiet, back-row member of a prayer group to being a platform speaker at huge rallies and conferences. If you are going to do any single solitary thing as a follower and servant of Jesus, this is what it’s built on. Somewhere, deep down inside, there is a love for Jesus, and though (goodness knows) you’ve let him down enough times, he wants to find that love, to give you a chance to express it, to heal the hurts and failures of the past, and give you new work to do.

These are not things for you to do to earn the forgiveness. Nothing can ever do that. It’s grace from start to finish. They are things to do out of the joy and relief that you already are forgiven. Things we are given to do precisely as the sign that we are forgiven. Things that will be costly, because Jesus’ own work was utterly costly... ‘Someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.’ Peter will complete his task as a shepherd by laying down his own life, in turn, for the sheep.

Let us pray. The words are by Brian Wren.

Great God, your love has called us here as we, by love, for love were made. Your living likeness still we bear, though marred, dishonoured, disobeyed. We come, with all our heart and mind, your call to hear, your love to find. Amen.