**Praise Service – Newton Flotman – Sunday 10.1.16**

**John 21**

**Fish and Forgiveness**

Ever gone to the cinema and sat through the credits at the end of the film waiting to see if there would be anything else? Most people leap up and rush out straight away, keen to beat the queue out of the car park - but if you wait until the final credits have rolled you will often be rewarded with a selection of outtakes or a sneak preview of the sequel! A taster of what is to come …

John 21 is a bit like that – it has been added to the Gospel after it was finished – we can tell that from the way chapter 20 ends: (in fact it’s very similar to the ending of ch 21)

*Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.* (John 20:30-31)

The Gospel is written to convince people of the truth. The purpose of the Gospel is stated as a kind of closing summary. Then we get chapter 21, that begins; ‘*Afterward Jesus appeared again to his disciples* …’ like a kind of ‘PS’ a sort of ‘Oh by the way I must just tell you this ….’ What is it about this chapter that was so important that John didn’t want to leave it out? That’s a question we might bear in mind as we look at it now …

There’s a lot in chapter 21 – so we’ll take a selective look at parts of it ….

Remember, this is happening quite soon after the resurrection …

By this point, the disciples had already seen the risen Jesus – he had appeared to Mary in the garden, and to the disciples in the Upper Room on two occasions (each time the doors had been locked).

And I guess some would find it easy to write off those appearances as being simply the result of the grief and trauma of bereavement. After all it is not an uncommon experience when just bereaved to ‘see’ the one who died.

A couple of days after my Dad died I was driving through the village and there was a car (which I didn’t recognise) coming towards us, driven by a man who looked exactly like my Dad. I didn’t say anything as he drove past – but Joel, my son (in passenger seat) turned to me and said ‘That looked like Grandad’ …

Maybe in his gospel - John wanted to provide some kind of proof that those first resurrection appearances were not merely the product of imagination. So now he records this occasion when the risen Jesus meets the disciples out fishing.

And of course, there is a kind of completion in this – because the disciples had been fishing three years previously when Jesus called them.

So had they returned to their old familiar way of life believing the adventure was over and they’d just carry on as before?

Is that what this final chapter is about – to remind them (and us) that our calling as disciples still stands? Or maybe it’s much more mundane than that – they hadn’t turned away at all – they were hungry and they just needed to eat!

Anyway - here they are - experienced fishermen, they have worked right through the night. The net result? – zilch, empty, no catch.

Now, early in the morning, Jesus stands on the shore – as yet unrecognised – well he is about 100 yards away and they’re probably not expecting to see him – and he tells the disciples to cast the net onto the other side of the boat. They do so and immediately the net is full! It was then that they recognised the Lord – either by his voice, or by the miracle or both.

Notice Jesus didn’t provide the miracle until they obeyed his direction. Perhaps it was his way of getting them to depend on him – to realise that he was actually involved with the details of their lives and that obedience to God will always be rewarded.

We may be doing the right thing but if we’re not following the Lord’s specific direction, we can wear ourselves out and still have nothing to show for our efforts. *‘Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labour in vain’* (Ps 127:1a)

So we have a miraculous catch of fish, provided by the miracle maker himself.

A few days before, this same Jesus had risen from the dead. Not returned from a long, pleasant holiday. Not woken up from a rather deep sleep. Not revived after a lengthy coma. He was dead – clinically dead, expired, lifeless, deceased. If you have ever seen a corpse you will know just how dead dead is. And Jesus was a corpse, lying on a cold slab in the dark, silent tomb for three days. But now … now - he is alive!

This miracle of resurrection is the very crux of our faith – it is because the resurrection is true that we have a faith at all.

What would be the point of any of it if Jesus had stayed dead? If his body had decayed, and rotted away dust to dust ashes to ashes? Dispersed on the breeze…*a mist that appeared for a little while and then vanished* (James 4:14)...

We wouldn’t be here as Christian people this evening if he hadn’t risen. There would be no Christian church if he hadn’t risen! It’s all a testimony to the fact that he is alive! The mother of all miracles!

We often say, don’t we, that we make our God too small.

We worry that we’ll forget that he is God of the miraculous, so we say ‘Expect big things of God – expect a miracle’ ‘DON’T limit God’, we say.

And that needs to be said. Because the truth is that he is the same yesterday, today and forever – we have no right to limit him.

But the irony is that we sometimes get so carried away with reminding ourselves to be naturally supernatural and to expect the spectacular that we do end up limiting God. We limit him *to* the miraculous! And in so doing we manage to exclude him from the everyday. From the ordinariness of life, from the quiet, seemingly insignificant moments…

I don’t know about you but if I’d been beaten, tortured, mocked, spat upon and crucified, then 3 days later resurrected to new life - never to die again - I might have just quite purposefully dusted myself off and paid a visit to a certain High Priest – knocked on his door and said: ‘Hi Caiaphas - remember me?’ just to see the look on his face!

But Jesus isn’t like that.

He comes heroic, fresh from the fight, aglow with the Spirit, not on clouds of glory, or with an entourage of angels, but by himself. Quiet. Unassuming. He comes to a small group of his friends to a bar-b-que on the beach. From the miraculous to the mundane. Now we see God in the everyday, ordinariness of a simple meal.

*Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.”* (John 21:12a)

*None of the disciples dared ask him, “Who are you?” They knew it was the Lord* (John 21:12b)

They knew – and yet there was something different about him … maybe this says something about resurrection life – we don’t really know what it will be like but here is reassurance for us that it won’t be totally unfamiliar – it will be the same yet different. Eating certainly seems to figure in heaven. We are glad to know this!

Eating together is a great leveller. We all have to eat regardless of age or so called ‘station in life’. Eating is basic to our existence. It is a very routine thing to do. Why wouldn’t the Lord of Creation, who provides the food, be present in this ordinariness?

When we invite others to share from our table – each one who sits down to eat is a unique individual, precious in God’s sight. We are aware of this as conversation unfolds. They bring their struggles and successes, hopes and dreams - their own particular story.

Some years ago a foreign missionary was a guest at our table – ‘And what did you do before you became a Christian?’ we asked. We received the matter of fact reply that - he used to be a terrorist...

...and why shouldn’t any of us welcome such a person to our table? Jesus welcomes allsorts to his.

The table is a place of hospitality and fellowship. Meals are conducive to sharing of ourselves – building intimacy and trust, forging relationship.

Jesus is often found at table throughout the gospels – scandalising the establishment with his choice of company! Jesus present in the ordinariness of life.

And there is a sacred aspect to even the simplest meal – even a meal eaten in solitude. It can be a place of meeting, of encounter, with God. Is it any wonder that Jesus asks us to remember him in the context of a meal?

As Jesus and the disciples share this fish breakfast, around the fire in the freshness of the early morning …. As Peter looks at the glowing embers, I wonder … I wonder, do his thoughts drift back to the last meal he shared with Jesus – to the long night that followed and to another early morning fire - in the courtyard of the High Priest’s house?

Does Peter hear his own words of denial echo through his mind, punctuated by the mocking sound of the cock crowing?

Does he recall some earlier words of Jesus?

*‘And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.’* Matt 16:18

Words that seem to mingle now with the dust and ashes. Surely Jesus must have been mistaken – how could anyone rely on Peter – how could Jesus think of placing so great a responsibility on him – of calling him to such a place of privilege – *on this rock I will build my church*?

But Peter’s story is our story … you and I know what it feels like to let Jesus down. We too have messed up – had high ideals – declared devotion in the heat of the moment only to find that it didn’t stand the test.

I’ll pray for my neighbours every day until they come to faith …

I’ll read my through my Bible in a year …

I’ll be a better father/mother, husband/wife, daughter/son, friend/neighbour …

I’ll …......you fill in the blanks …

We too have denied Jesus in our words, thoughts and actions – maybe in more subtle ways than Peter – but hey - denial is denial.

Peter’s face flushes red, not with the glow of the fire, but with shame and regret.

Now Jesus speaks again, calling Peter back to the present moment:

*“Simon, son of John, do you truly love me more than these?”* (John 21:15)

Three questions asked, three answers given, three denials revoked. Peter is forgiven, reinstated. The love of Jesus covers his sin.

Without God’s forgiveness – our past failures will cripple us. They will imprison us. But Jesus offers freedom! The cross has shattered the chains that were binding us. It’s up to us to shake them off and walk free! Our hearts desire it, our voices cry out for it, but do we know what it is to receive his forgiveness?

The risen Jesus is among us and with us.

Take a look at the blood-stained cross,

peer inside the empty tomb,

come, come share the meal – the bread and the wine – then try saying you don’t know his forgiveness, and you’ve never tasted his love....

As you know, the NT was written originally in Greek. And it’s interesting to note that in the Greek, two different words for love are used in this exchange between Peter and Jesus.

There is Agape = self-sacrificial love, which looks to the other person’s highest good, regardless of how we actually feel about that person, it is love of the very highest order – it is Christian love.

And the other word used is Philio = which describes love for family, brotherly love, a deep affection and even loyalty.

When Jesus asks Peter the first time ‘*Do you love me*?’ He uses the word ‘agape’. He is calling Peter to that highest form of self-sacrificial love.

It is as if he is asking ‘Would you really lay down your life for me?’ After all, those are the words that Peter himself had spoken to Jesus at the last supper: ‘*I will lay down my life for you*’ he had said (John 13:37)…..

Hours later, Peter denied he even knew Jesus.

Peter has had a painful lesson in humility – the learning curve has been dizzyingly steep – but he has benefited from it. He has grown in self-awareness, there is a new maturity about him – greater depth, more integrity.

We need to recognise that we will never live the Christian life in our own strength – never. If we make wild promises (even if they are noble) and God isn’t in it then it won’t happen – if we cast our net on the wrong side of the boat … we can’t expect God to fill it.

Peter replies ‘*Yes, Lord, you know that I love you*’... but he uses the word ‘philio’. This indicates a deep affection - but it doesn’t match the ‘agape’ love that Jesus is asking for.

Again Jesus asks Peter ‘Do you love me?’ – still using the word ‘agape’ and again Peter replies with the word ‘philio’, probably desperately uncomfortable with the poverty of his response....

Finally Jesus asks a third time – ‘Do you love me?’

But now Jesus uses Peter’s word ‘philio’. Peter cannot reach up to meet Jesus, so Jesus reaches down to meet Peter.

He is the God who comes to us.

Jesus will always call us higher, challenging us to grow…..meanwhile he meets us where we are. God the Father says of Jesus (Isaiah 42:3) *‘a bruised reed he will not break and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out’*

We may carry the bruises of past abuse, hurts and regrets – he won’t break us – he will forgive us, bring healing and peace

The wick of our faith may be smouldering dangerously low – he won’t snuff it out, he will help us fan it into flame again

Jesus is tender hearted towards us, he is eager to accept what we are willing and able to offer, and like the young boy’s loaves and fishes he will take what we give and multiply it.

He will take our faltering steps, our stumbled words, our mispronounced bible names, our off key singing, flat notes and missed beats and make sweet music with them ….don’t be sitting here tonight thinking ‘I have nothing to give’ – yes you have!

It’s our heart he’s after – we can give him that. Even just a little of it will delight him if our heart’s cry truly is ‘Lord I love you a little but I want to love you more…’

Each time Peter responds to Jesus with a declaration of love, Jesus responds by calling him to serve. *Feed my lambs. Take care of my sheep. Feed my sheep.*

Love for Jesus is the foundational qualification for ministry – he will supply the necessary gifts – because as he calls so he equips, for whatever it may be.

And we all have a calling. We all share the highest calling – simply to be a baptised child of God.

Our primary concern is to do what Jesus asks because we love him. Listen to him. What exactly has he asked you in particular to do?

We mustn’t think that our past disqualifies us – it didn’t disqualify Peter.

It didn’t disqualify King David. David is little remembered as an adulterer and murderer. But much remembered as the one who wrote most of the psalms, a man after God’s own heart.

It is love for God that will win through every time.

God is there in the ordinariness of everyday, offering direction, offering forgiveness, calling us to love him, calling us to serve him.

The apostle Peter made his own contribution to the Scriptures. So as I was preparing for this, I took a quick look at what he’d written - 1 and 2 Peter. And a small section in 1 Peter 4 jumped out at me – it seemed to parallel what we’ve just been thinking about this evening... They are 3 consecutive verses: (1 Peter 4:8-10)

*Above all love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.* (v8)

Remember who’s writing this. (Words inspired by God, penned by Peter) Here speaks the voice of experience. Peter knows that Love loves to forgive.

*Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.* (v9)

Meals are a central feature of hospitality – the table is a place to forge relationship – a meeting with God in the ordinary. Eating together is crucial in the formation of meaningful community.

*Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms.* (v10)

Jesus is still building his church. Listen to the call – listen to his call on your life - and go with it.

# Amen