

Easter 3  
22/4/2007

Mark the Evangelist

Acts 9:1-6  
Psalm 30  
Revelation 5:11-14  
John 21:1-19

### Epilogue, or never ending story?

---

The final verse of Chapter 20 of John's Gospel is a conclusion, but in Chapter 21 the writer commences again. Scholars debate what this means, but our concern is not with differences in style or whether this is a separate text, badly integrated. Our concern is what it means these stories are found where they are.

Chapter 21 obviously came later because it reports the manner of Peter's death. He, the leader of the disciples, suggested they go fishing. Does this return to their previous activity signal the time of discipleship is over? How could that be? Thomas is among them, whose encounter with the Risen One received special attention in the previous chapter. What has happened to the amazement at seeing the Lord and the power of Spirit breathed upon them?

The fishing happens in the dark. For John this means it is conducted in a state of unfaith. The night of toil is futile and at dawn the nets are empty. But dawn is the time for the Risen One, who meets them there. At first they fail to recognize him. The encounter seems more like a first experience, rather than the third or fourth. Yet they do not protest at his intervention. He is the familiar stranger and once they follow his words, instead of their own will, their empty nets are filled to breaking point.

This chapter is about what it means to travel further on in time from the original events. The boat, a symbol for the church, was sailing on the sea of life. The great catch of fish is a symbol of the world wide church of God, people whom God in Christ had drawn away from death into life. This story is to show that, as time went on, the disciples had trouble retaining the vision of Jesus in risen life. But when the resort to their ordinary, familiar activities proved fruitless, he did not let them alone. He came to nurture them, and sustain them in their mission. It was transforming.

Located as it is, this chapter is saying is that, as we move further on in time from the revelatory event that brings faith to birth, the temptation is to live self-directed lives. This abrogates the call and is fruitless. It is contact with **the familiar stranger** that brings life, and **he initiated the contact**. You would think, after all that happened, their recognition would have been instantaneous, but it wasn't. This is a comment on the nature of the resurrection. Everything flows from it, but it is not readily accessible or easily understood. It is difficult to hold onto. Here Jesus is present in a way that is congruent with the life and spirit already revealed to them, but an element of ambiguity remains. There is no fixed vision on our side, which settles this matter once and for all. Rather, what we see is an ongoing relationship with Jesus' presence, which is not under our control but continues to speak to us through his identity, to bring light and life in place of darkness and death.

One of the things I am aware of in a congregation like this is the magnetic power of Grandchildren. Grandparents travel a long way to maintain the relationship they have with these special people. Here Jesus was drawn to be with his children again. He came walking around the lake of their life to re-engage in relationship with them. He is not restricted or defeated by their losses. He has food for them they did not prepare. Fish for salvation and bread for eternal life. This is somewhat Eucharistic, and it is reminiscent of the miracle of the loaves and the fishes, where those who had nothing were graciously fed. Such are the gifts from the one who will not let his people go. His will for the mission of the church is that it will be fruitful, saving and nurturing.

The encounter includes the serious business of reshaping the life of the believers. He re-stokes the fire of their love and calls them to follow him anew in their task as the people of God. Special attention is given to Peter. His privilege is to be tested and challenged to love more than the rest. He must feed the flock the Lamb of God has gathered into the fold. We don't know why this happened to Peter. Perhaps it was because of his denials. Or perhaps it was because he had led the others in turning away from their primary task. But the encounter between Jesus and Peter shows the special privilege of Church leaders is to be called to the discipline of remembering **whose is the power**, and what it means to stay true to the role of shepherding the people of God. But above all, their call to follow means being willing to accept everything that Jesus accepted. Peter did say yes. Even in death he did not hold back.

There are two things to think on as we go. Consider the net and 153 fish. It is a sign of the unity and diversity of the church, which Christ wills to gather through his disciples. Because this story comes later we may speculate that one of the things it was aiming to help with was the problem of how to contain a growing church, increasingly full of different people with different opinions about faith and life. It seemed the net would burst. But by due care and attention the disciples kept it intact. As we in our church struggle with profound questions of unity and diversity, it is a challenge to see that the task of those in the boat is to maintain an unbroken net; to hold together all the fish the Lord has given.

Secondly, at the end of this chapter we find the words:

...there are also many other things Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose the whole world could not contain the books that would be written.

In Acts the Risen One told Paul his attacks on the followers of the Way were attacks on the living body of Christ. There is a link with the point that Bonhoeffer makes: the church is Christ existing as community in the world today. Christ is at work through his body. That is why there are many other things Jesus did - and he keeps doing them. His story is not over. He who was crucified at Jerusalem is not limited by that death, or confined to the past, or to the immediate days after the resurrection. His presence is something more than an aspect of the memory of the disciples, and it transcends events in a particular time. The Basis of Union says that, in the time between the resurrection and the final consummation, Christ: *in his own strange way ... constitutes, rules and renews [the disciples] as his Church*. Even today this is happening. Where the sound of the Gospel breaks open hearts of stone and enables them to love again; where a fresh hold is taken on faith; where empty nets, empty lives and empty stomachs are filled with the abundance of grace, there Jesus is at work in our world again.

Are we able to be bold enough to imagine the stories of our life together here have a place in the world full of books about what Jesus did?

Whether or not we would be so brave, the last chapter of John is for all who find this faith business difficult. Who find it impossible to hold onto Jesus; who are discouraged because it seems the nets in our life and the life of our church are empty or about to break; who, in despair, are tempted to go back to our old ways. If that fits us then reflect on this. His presence with them was not a result of their efforts or mood; **it was a gift that found its way to them despite themselves.** It came to restore life, to mend broken relationships, to fill the nets of our life, and enliven energies for the great task we have of witnessing to God's love for the world, revealed in him.