

Sermon – John 21: 1-14

V 12. *Jesus said to them, "come and have breakfast." None of the disciples dared ask him, "who are you?" They knew it was the Lord."*

Isn't it true that in many parts of our daily life each of us needs a combination of evidence and trust in what other people say?

Isn't that the question that is being asked of us in the impending election?

Truth or lie, claim or spin?

It is much easier when we deal with scientific issues where scientifically validated facts are known and only trust in experts is required of us.

Some people can accept that if you place an aeroplane on a runway, the pilot advances the throttles and the plane will reliably rise into the air-it's obvious isn't it? (Assuming of course there is no volcano around!) Nothing to think about.

But if you are like me, with a scientific bent, I need to understand that the operation of the engines involves compression of air, burning of fuel and forces exerted via the column of air that is ejected from the back of the engine.

I also need to understand that the reason the plane lifts off the runway relates to the difference speeds of the air moving over the curved surface of the top of the wing and the flat surface of the underneath of the wing producing lift. You may reasonably say, I may make my life unnecessarily complicated, but that is me.

In the same way, all of us are faced with a decision about the resurrection of Jesus. Some of us will accept with joy what we find written in the Scriptures but some will ask ourselves what evidence is there?

Both approaches contain a belief in the word of God, but

for some, the reading of the Scripture is quite enough where for others the thought about the evidence is necessary.

Let me just say in passing that when dealing with evidence it is quite wrong to apply scientific rules to spiritual things as it is to apply spiritual rules to scientific issues. This is why no one should try to equate matters of faith with matters of scientific fact. Neither is more or less valid in its own domain.

Why do I think we need to look at the evidence for the resurrection as recorded in today's scripture reading? Simply that Jesus saw the need to provide clear and irrefutable evidence of His bodily resurrection to his disciples.

He could have said – I have already presented evidence from old testament scripture that the Messiah would die and rise from the dead; He could have said – I have already appeared to some of the disciples and to the women – why does anyone need further evidence. But here He saw a further need to appear to His disciples and reinforce their experience of the resurrection.

Incidentally, I would always encourage anyone who wishes to look again at the evidence of the resurrection to read the book "Who moved the stone?" by Frank Morrison is well-known.

This is a book written by a man searching for faith who started the book seemingly uncertain of the validity of the evidence for the resurrection and by the end of writing a book became totally convinced of the evidence and thereby came to a believing faith.

Before we look at this apparently simple post-resurrection narrative, we need to say something about the position of John chapter 21

First we must remind ourselves that the gospel of John is somewhat different than the first three Gospels in that there is a particular aim of his gospel to present both the gospel story and the deeper theological meaning of it.

That is not to say that it does not contain the history of Jesus's birth, ministry, death and resurrection but that we are encouraged to look deeper into the significance of that story.

For evidence of this view of John's Gospel just look at chapter 1 containing the great statement of our faith "*in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.*" This is not historical narrative but rather a divine insight into the depths of our faith.

Now if you read through the gospel of John in its entirety, it appears that the gospel text ends satisfactorily at the end of chapter 20 with a closing couple of verses which read very much like a coda at the end of a book.

Verse 30 "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 is the Christ, the son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."

So chapter 21 is clearly an afterthought.

Undoubtedly this gospel was written by someone who witnessed the events he recorded but this chapter seems in the wrong place. If this were a learned theological paper or even an article in a newspaper, it might be criticised as being in the wrong order and the editor would certainly send it back for revision.

But this is a living Word of God and John clearly has in mind a difficulty that faces any reader, including ourselves---- the reality and the nature of the resurrection of Jesus.

David spoke to us last week about the crucial nature of the belief in the resurrection emphasising that such belief is a nonnegotiable part of our faith and I want to take this a little further in relation to this story by the sea of Tiberius.

I believe the main aim of this additional, story of Jesus and the catch of fish, is to reinforce the fact of the bodily resurrection of Jesus, and thereby of ourselves in due time, and in God's wisdom, this would help those who in later years had to oppose the idea that Jesus was always a spirit and never human.

Again a little bit of history. There were a group of what were called gnostic churches who believed that Jesus had never been human, rather only a spirit and therefore we as spiritual beings should seek to become like him and separate ourselves from our earthly bodies to attain a full revelation of God.

We believe of course that this is wrong and we hold the contrary view that Jesus was both God and fully human, with a human body --- A body that could experience the suffering of the cross and the full bodily resurrection which we are talking about here.

With all this in brain let's consider this strange appendix to John's Gospel.

I believe the first thing we learn is the familiar and historical accuracy of the story. Nighttime fishing was the pattern in this region of the sea of Tiberius - another name for the Sea of Galilee.

A writer with great knowledge of this part of the world wrote *"there are certain kinds of fishing always carried on at night. It is a beautiful sight. With a blazing torch, the boat glides over the flashing sea, and the men stand gazing keenly into it until their prey is sighted, when quick as lightning, they fling their nets; and like any fishing I have ever done you often see the tired fishermen coming suddenly into harbour in the*

morning, having toiled all night in vain." To those keen fishermen here perhaps the last phrase about lack of success will be familiar!

Peter, Thomas (the doubter), Nathaniel, the sons of Zebedee, James and John) and two other disciples were together by the sea of Tiberius and Peter suggested they would go fishing. This had been their normal practice, their day-to-day job, their ordinary life before their lives were turned over by Jesus' call to become fishers of men.

The fact that they had returned to their homes and to their previous occupation I believe confirms at this stage they had **not** understood fully that they had a new task that followed on from their experience of the resurrection story.

What were they to do once the enormity of the crucifixion and the wonder and confusion of the apparent experience of Jesus post-resurrection had passed?

Should they be on the road again?

Should they stay in Jerusalem?

Should they hide themselves away from the Jewish hierarchy? Were they still wanted men?

I believe that this story reinforces the fact that they were so confused by the events that they had to seek the familiarity of their homes, their lifestyle and therefore their work as fishermen.

And as we will see, we begin to realise again that this added chapter is not about fishing but about the reality of the resurrection.

The next thing that reinforces the validity of the story is Jesus's action in telling them *"throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some."* Some people interpret this as a miracle but I do not believe this is the case.

Dare I say that the heading in the NIV "Jesus and the miraculous catch of fish" is incorrect.

I believe Jesus' action and the response of the fishermen emphasises the familiar ordinariness of these events rather than a miracle.

HV Morton who wrote "In the steps of the master" describes two men fishing on the shores of the lake. He writes *"One had waded out from the shore and is casting a net into the water. But time after time the net came up empty but there was a second man standing in the shadows. While he was waiting for another cast, Abdul shouted to him from the bank to fling to the left which he instantly did and this time he was successful."*

It happens very often. The man with the net must rely on the advice of someone on shore, who tells him to cast either to the left or the right, because in the clear water the man on the shore can often see a shoal of fish invisible to the man on the boat or in the water."

Jesus was acting as a guide to his fishermen disciples, using human skills. The difference is that he knew that that cast would be successful. The fishermen needed to trust their guide despite being unable to see where the fish were.

Once again therefore, it is not the success of the fishing that we need to pay attention to but rather the character and identity of the person who was telling them what to do, and the confidence that his instruction would lead to success.

I believe one of the great joys that characterise the Christian life is to recognise when God is leading us to do something which we otherwise would not have thought of doing.

If we involve him in every aspect of our lives, pretty soon each one of us will have this extraordinary experience.

We should not expect a great voice from heaven *necessarily* or a miraculous dramatic act of God to tell us what to do.

I am not saying that that doesn't occur on some occasions to some people but I believe that the majority of the time God shows us the way and we have to respond.

Sometimes we recognise such leading in retrospect and there is nothing wrong with that. It is only when we have a prayerful and constant relationship with our master that we recognise his hand in the choices we have to make.

So we should not look to Jesus for an instantaneous miracle when rather we should be looking for him to guide us through natural events or pathways that he places before us. Like the fishermen on the sea of Tiberius, we have to trust that is guiding is right and then, most importantly act on the basis of that guide.

It was for love that Jesus told the disciples to cast the net on the right side of the boat.

It was a demonstration of a human skill of an expert fishermen that he used and not a miracle that set aside wools of nature.

They had not demanded a successful catch; they were aware that fishing was an uncertain profession but he gave the successful catch as a free gift of love.

And as a result he was able to resolve their particular issue that I believe was a difficulty in understanding the nature of true bodily resurrection.

It was more than a desire that they should have a good breakfast but to demonstrate once and for all that he was alive and resurrected and the bodily form of that resurrection.

In this and indeed his appearance to doubting Thomas, Jesus goes out of his way to emphasise that he was not a vision, he was not a ghost, not an hallucination but a real person, with real wounds in real flesh.

Would a ghostly spirit tell them how to fish?

Would a ghostly spirit be able to light and tend a charcoal fire on a beach and cook fish?

Would a hallucination have brought bread and fish and give gave it to them to eat?

Would a ghost be able to eat, drink and talk in an entirely human way.

Jesus comes to us in exactly the same way that he came to these disciples. He comes to us **where we are**, perhaps lacking in faith, perhaps on the downturn after the mountaintop experience of Easter morning.

He comes to us as we struggle with the nature of his resurrection and indeed of our bodies so that we can confidently believe.

But faith in the resurrection is not an endpoint but a starting point.

There was one individual at this lakeside breakfast whose heart was broken by failure and sought forgiveness.

If we read on in chapter 21 of John's Gospel we hear that at the end of this breakfast, he goes on to reinstate Peter following his thrice denial by asking him three times whether he loved him and then commanding him to feed his sheep.

We need to remind ourselves that in the absence of a belief in the resurrection, we cannot receive the forgiveness that this brings, nor can we respond properly to God's commands for the future.

And having come to us where we are, **he reminds us that we can carry out miracles of love every day to our fellow men and women** and thereby help them to understand that not only do we believe in the

resurrection of Jesus but that we believe in Jesus' statement to the criminal on the cross "today you will be with me in Paradise" .

We can respond to human requests for help requiring human skills, giving acts of love, practical aid, and by doing that in Jesus's name we bring such acts as miracles in Jesus name.

And if the hearts of those we help are open to this experience, like the disciples on the beach, they will not need to ask him "who are you?" For like them they will know it is the Lord.

Jesus wants us to get out of our secure boat, doing whatever we consider our normal daily profession or activity.

He wants us to recognise him, come close to him and receive not a hot breakfast of fish and bread but a salvation meal that will last for eternity. And he wants us in his name to share that meal by carrying out miracles of love to our fellow men and women.

Are you and I moving on with a belief in the resurrection to carry out a miracle today?

Amen