5 May 2019: Choral Eucharist
The Third Sunday of Easter

The Revd Canon Edmund Newey, The Sub Dean

In nomine…

Isn’t the gospel passage we’ve just heard wonderful? The last chapter of John’s gospel is full of the mystery, the generosity, the awe of the risen Lord.

Of course it has some odd details too. Why is it, for instance, that Peter, when he has recognised the unknown man on the shore as Jesus, first puts on his clothes and then jumps into the sea? What is he up to? Standard practice is surely to do the opposite. And what about the catch of fish, ‘a hundred and fifty-three of them’. Such a catch exceeds all reasonable expectations and how could Peter single-handedly have hauled ashore the weight of so many fish? In this, the closing chapter of the last gospel, we are moving in a new and different world. A world at once familiar and wholly changed. A world in which normal expectations are overturned. A world in which what was dead has returned for ever to life.

If you consult bible commentaries on John 21, you’ll find that on the whole they are a bit dismissive. Biblical scholars tend to see it as a superfluous afterthought, probably added at a slightly later date by somebody other than the original gospel writer. Perhaps they’re right, but I think they miss the point. What we have in this marvellous chapter is a set of meditations on what it is like to encounter the risen Christ: to meet him and recognise him; to eat with him; to be questioned, challenged and blessed by his presence.

Perhaps the most important thing to notice about this whole story is the place in which it happens: the sea of Tiberias, which is just another name for the Sea of Galilee. The Sea of Galilee is the place where much of Jesus’s early ministry took place. Disorientated, as well they might be, by recent events in Jerusalem, the disciples have returned to familiar places and familiar work, testing out long-unused muscles on the hard labour of fishing through the night. But of course they have also returned to the place where they were called by Jesus, called to drop what they were doing and catch not fish but people.
And that call to the disciples at the beginning of Our Lord’s ministry is repeated again here. The inconceivably huge catch of one hundred and fifty-three fish points to the equally inconceivable resurrection of Christ, the ground of the disciples’ hope, the cause of our joy.

But today’s gospel is not just about joy. It is also about betrayal and repentance. When the disciples reach the shore they find a fire burning there: a charcoal fire. It’s no coincidence that, if we turn back to chapter eighteen of the gospel, we find a charcoal fire there too, burning in the courtyard of the high priest. It’s the fire at which Peter warms himself, even as he is in the process of denying Jesus. As Peter huddled close to the fire against the cold, they asked him “‘Are you not also one of this man’s disciples?’ He said, ‘I am not’”. So here on the lakeshore Peter has to stand with Jesus by this second fire, to smell the smoke of his betrayal.

And then when they have finished breakfast, Jesus takes Peter aside and asks him that famous series of questions: ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me?’. The question is repeated three times, echoing the three times Peter denied Jesus before the cock crowed. But this exchange between Peter and Jesus also works at a deeper level. In the Greek that lies behind our translation there are several words which we usually translate into English as love. There is one word for the strongest sense of love, the self-sacrificial, all-embracing, love of the world shown by God in Christ. And there is another, weaker, word, for the love of human friendship. So we could translate the dialogue between Peter and Jesus like this: “Simon, Son of John, do you love me? Yes, Lord, you know that I am your friend… Simon, son of John, do you love me? Yes, Lord, you know that I am friends with you…Simon, son of John, are you my friend? Yes, Lord, you know everything, you know that I am your friend.”

What we have here is Jesus accommodating himself to Peter. Peter, who wants desperately to be accepted and loved by Christ, but who cannot bring himself to claim a greater love than he feels. And this is not a failure on Peter’s part. It’s both brave and honest. How many of us can honestly claim that we love God? We want to love God and we know that we are loved by God. But our human love is a weak and feeble thing alongside the love of God and it is only by sharing in Christ, by opening ourselves to the love of God shown in him that we can hope to love God worthily. Our love of God is not our own doing, but the work of God’s Spirit in us.

Today’s readings give us a couple of hints about how that love might – just – come to life in us. The first is in the repeated words of Jesus to Peter: ‘Feed my lambs’, ‘tend my sheep’,
feed my sheep’. Our love of God is shown in the way we care for our fellow beings, the way we tend and feed the sheep in God’s fold. I have no first-hand experience of shepherding, but what little I have seen of it in the Lake District has made me realise what a demanding labour it is. When the sheep need to be rounded up from the hills for shearing or lambing, the local people drop everything else. In Eskdale I once saw thousands of sheep being gathered in: all the local farmers had combined to maximise man and womanpower; four generations of shepherds were on the hill, from great-grandfather to great-granddaughter, all working towards one common aim. And we shouldn’t be surprised if our own pastoral responsibilities are equally demanding. Dragging those 153 fish to shore is hard labour: caring for one another is a task none of us can accomplish alone.

The second hint at how we are to love God came in our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles. Paul, blinded by his vision of Christ is at a loss to explain what is happening to him. Helplessly he asks “Who are you Lord?” and the reply [comes], ‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting”. We, as present day believers, have to put the same question to Christ as we encounter him in our own lives, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And it’s a question answered in the last words of our gospel reading, ‘Follow me’. We are to follow Jesus Christ, who is the way, the truth and the life. And, as such, the good news, the gospel of Christ can never give us a final answer. Instead it gives us something much more interesting and much more challenging than a final answer: a life, a death and a resurrection: to be recognised, followed and shared in.

Conversion to Christ is not primarily about the acceptance of a series of ideas or deciding to act in a certain way. Conversion is two things: first, repentance of our selfishness; and, secondly, renewal in, with and for Christ. This is a pattern to be found throughout the gospels. Time and again the gospels tell us of tax collectors and sinners, women of doubtful repute, fishermen, shepherds and wise men, those of high and low standing alike, who turn from their preoccupations to follow Christ in the way.

Filled by the Spirit, Jesus calls us too to follow him in the way, privileged to call him both our brother and our God.

May we grow in that faith, look forward in that hope and live in that love, tending and feeding each other as Christ’s lambs, God’s sheep, children of our heavenly Father.

Amen.