

### **Introduction**

As we read the New Testament it is interesting to notice the number of accounts of some of the occasions on which Jesus appeared to his followers after his resurrection from the dead. Paul too in his epistles refers to them and wants to make it very clear that Jesus really did rise again from the dead and was seen on many occasions and by many different people, individually and in groups. Jesus appeared many times after his resurrection, as Luke confirms at the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles. It wasn't simply a conjuring act where he popped up like a rabbit to astonish his followers. Each appearance that is recorded shows that Jesus had a definite reason or purpose for his appearance.

a) Firstly he wanted to establish beyond doubt that he really had risen from the dead and so, on that first Easter day, he appeared to the women, to Cleopas and another disciple on the road to Emmaus, and to the other disciples in the upper room. He ate fish in front of the disciples to reassure them that he wasn't a ghost and when Thomas found it hard to believe what the other disciples told him about Jesus' resurrection He made a point of talking to him and allowing him to touch his wounded hands and side, so that he could believe for himself that his Lord had risen.

b) One of the other things that he did during this time was to make sure that the disciples understood that his death and resurrection wasn't a mistake but part of God's purpose and foretold in scripture. So Luke records him teaching the disciples on the Emmaus road and again in the upper room and helping them to understand what had been written about him in scripture. We see Peter putting that teaching into good use on the day of Pentecost when he gave his first public sermon and preached from scripture about Jesus.

c) Jesus also, according to Luke, at the beginning of Acts spoke to them about God's Kingdom, he gave them their commission - to go and preach the gospel to all nations and instructed them to wait until they received power from the Holy Spirit to equip them for their calling.

d) The final, and very important thing that he did during the time that he spent with his disciples after the resurrection was to bring forgiveness and healing where it was needed and this is what we see him doing in today's Gospel reading.

John tells us that some of the disciples were together by the Sea of Galilee and Peter decided that he wanted to go fishing. Matthew records that the angel told them to go to Galilee to wait for Jesus there, so fishing was the obvious way of occupying themselves whilst for Jesus to reappear again; they spent the night fishing and caught nothing.

In the morning Jesus met them as they returned empty handed and the story has strong echoes of an earlier incident recorded in Luke where, the disciples had also fished all night and caught nothing. That was fairly early on in Jesus's ministry at the time when he first called Peter, James and John to follow him. Jesus had borrowed one of the boats in order to preach to the crowd from the lake and after he had finished he told the disciples to let down their nets for a catch of fish. Having worked all night with no results they were tired but obeyed and when they pulled them in the nets were so full of fish that they began to break and the fishermen needed help from their friends in the other boat. They filled the boats so full that they were almost sinking.

Peter's response to this miracle was to realise Jesus' power and holiness, and his own sinfulness. Luke tells us that he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man". When we come face to face with Jesus' in his power it does make us very aware of our own sin and failure and this is certainly what happened to Peter. But Jesus reassured him and called him to follow him. "Don't be afraid. From now on you will catch men and women". This was the beginning of Peter's commitment to Jesus and he gave up his work to go with him.

In our Gospel reading the disciples had again fished all night and were returning with no catch. Jesus appeared on the shore and called to them. They did not, at first, recognise him - as happened at least three times after his resurrection. This time he suggested they let down their nets on the other side of the boat. Some commentators question whether this was actually a miracle or whether, from the shore, Jesus could see the shoal of fish swimming on the other side of the boat and was able to direct the disciples where to throw their nets. Whatever the case, the result was that their nets were full to overflowing and, as they hauled them, in John recognised that this was no casual met stranger but their risen Lord.

Peter's response was to put on his jacket and leap out of the boat to swim to shore. I have often wondered why he put on his coat to swim, as most of us would take it off before leaping into the water. It could be that having stripped off for work Peter wanted to be properly dressed when he came face to face with his Lord. As on the previous occasion he was very aware of his sinfulness - more so this time having let Jesus down very badly on the night before he died when he denied even knowing him. Peter is desperate to be alone with Jesus and to be assured of his forgiveness; he can't wait for the boat to reach the shore so he leaps in and swims.

Acts 9:1-6

John 21:1-19

When the other disciples reach the shore they find a charcoal fire burning with fish cooking on it and some bread. Jesus tells them to bring some of their catch as well and invites them to have breakfast with him. It is a lovely scene and as I read I wondered how many other breakfasts they had shared with Jesus by the lakeside in the time they had spent together. The disciples didn't dare to ask him, "Who are you?" They knew that this was Jesus, risen from death and changed, but yet very much their Lord and master.

After breakfast Jesus deals with Peter's guilt and shame and brings him forgiveness and healing. On first reading this story it may appear almost as if Jesus is taunting Peter with his failure. Did he really have to ask him three times whether he loved him? Was he simply getting his own back and rubbing it in how badly Peter had let him down - or was there some purpose behind the thrice repeated question?

Jesus never did unnecessary things and he certainly was never vindictive what we see him doing here is something very special. He was actually not simply offering Peter forgiveness for his failure but actually bringing healing of the memory of what had happened.

John tells us in chapter 18:18 that when Peter was put to the test and asked if he was one of Jesus' followers he was standing with the high priests servants and police around a charcoal fire, keeping warm. It is no coincidence that Jesus had lit a similar charcoal fire by the lakeside. Yes, he wanted to cook breakfast, but the fire he built was very similar to the one burning outside the High Priest's house on the night he was betrayed. John describes it as a "charcoal fire" 'anthrakian'. ἀνθρακικῆν. The only other place in the New Testament where this word is used to describe fire is here in John 21. Every other reference to fire uses the word 'pur'. πῦρ. The fire that Jesus built was very specifically a charcoal fire and as Peter sat beside Jesus by that fire he must have been clearly remembering the last time he had warmed himself at a charcoal fire. And as he sat with his risen Lord that memory must have been almost too painful to bear. Imagine the shame and the self-disgust that he might have been feeling.

Jesus knew only too well where Peter's thought would be taking him - he himself had helped to conjure up the memory, not in order to condemn, but so that he could forgive and bring healing. As they sat there Jesus very gently asked him "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than all else?" Peter must have been grieved that the question needed to be asked but very relieved to have the opportunity to restate his love and commitment to his Lord. "Yes Lord," he answered "You know that I love you". And Jesus responded by giving back to him his self-respect and reaffirming his calling as one of Jesus' disciples. In fact this time he was not simply giving Peter the task of bringing men and women to know

Acts 9:1-6

John 21:1-19

Jesus he was actually giving him the very trusted role of caring for Jesus' followers "Feed my sheep!" Jesus had not only forgiven Peter he was clearly showing that he trusted him.

Peter must have been overwhelmed with joy and relief. That unbearable burden he had been carrying around had been lifted. He had been able to tell his Lord how sorry he was for his failure and to receive, not only forgiveness, but to be given again the task caring for Jesus' followers. Imagine then his sadness and pain to hear Jesus repeat his question "Do you love me?" not once but twice more.

As I said this was not simply a case of Jesus rubbing in Peter's failure and guilt. It was actually him rubbing out the memory of each painful denial. For each time that Peter had been asked "Are you one of his followers?" Jesus was giving him the opportunity to show his love and allegiance. He asked "Do you love me?" and so Peter was able to reaffirm his love and commitment and receive full forgiveness and healing.

Jesus by his death and resurrection brings healing and forgiveness to all our failure and sin. And he still continues today to bring his love, his forgiveness and his full acceptance into all our failure and pain. What Jesus did for Peter by the lakeside was to heal even the memory of his guilt and failure and today, by his Spirit, Jesus continues to bring full emotional and spiritual healing to us. He has the ability to take us back to the source of our guilt and hurt and to give us the opportunity to be renewed, restored, forgiven and reinstated.

Most of us have painful memories and wounds and it is God's will that we be made fully whole and healed of those sins and hurts. As we open ourselves increasingly to his Spirit he is able to bring healing and new life into our deepest darkest secrets.