

Our readings this morning are probably the two most important stories in terms of the development of the early church that occurred in those early days after Jesus' death and resurrection.

Peter and Paul were the two men responsible for there being a church at all. Peter pretty much created the church and Paul then set about spreading it around the part of the world that was accessible to him. And, as a preacher, to have both of these stories on the same day, is really not ideal. So, whilst I have decided to focus on Peter as his story really is the end of the post Easter story, I just want to say a few things about the Paul conversion story first.

Paul's conversion story is one of the classics of Christianity. Paul, whose first introduction to us, as Saul, was when he held the coats of those who stoned to death Stephen – the first person to die because he was a Christian – was really a much feared, very nasty, man. He was renowned as a Christian hunter – he would search out followers of Jesus and have them thrown into prison, where their future would almost certainly be painful, alone, and limited. And for some reason God chose this evil man to be the man to spread his church. I'm not even going to begin to hypothesise why he chose Saul to do this – but what I will say is that by the very fact that he did choose Saul, God gave us a very strong message, and that is that no-one is beyond help.

If evil Saul can become super missionary Paul then what I would say to you this morning is this.

If you are worried about anyone in your family, or among your friends or acquaintances, and you are thinking – why are they going in that direction in their lives? Or perhaps why have they done that? Then what the story of Saul's conversion tells us is that no-one is beyond God's redemption. There are all sorts of other stories throughout the last two thousand years of people who God has reached out to and transformed their lives, so if you know of someone who needs that then it is not wasted effort to pray that their lives can be turned around.

Our gospel reading tells us of another transformation, but perhaps not from such a dreadful position as the Saul / Paul story began. But before looking at Peter let's have a look at where this story comes into the story of Jesus and in the gospels. There are two particular things that I would like to start by mentioning. The first of those is to do with how chapter 21 of John's gospel almost feels like something just tacked on to the end of an already completed book.

Verses 30 and 31 of chapter 20, which I deliberately omitted from last week's gospel reading as I wanted to talk about them this week, say this:

'Jesus performed many other 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 Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.'

I frequently say that the gospels are not biographies of Jesus – they do not follow him from day to day but are selective.

What they are are appeals to accept Jesus as Saviour, Master and Lord – the Son of God – the Promised Messiah. And with these last two verses John, the author, is saying, job done – I have finished.

So what is chapter 21 all about. Whoever it was that put together the final version of John's gospel – and there are always great mysteries, and great disagreements about the authorship of most books of the bible – decided that there was one more account of something that happened in Jesus' ministry, that we, the readers should be told about. Which all kind of makes chapter 21, most of which we read in our gospel this morning even more important.

Which then brings us to the second thing I wanted to mention. Doesn't that story about, 'casting your nets on the other side', sound familiar? Let me read to you, Luke, chapter 5 vs 1-11.

'One day as Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret, the people were crowding around him and listening to the word of God. He saw at the water's edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from shore. Then he sat down and taught the people from the boat.

When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch."

Simon answered, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets."

When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. So they signalled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink.

When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners.

Then Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will fish for people." So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.'

Kind of similar really isn't it, but is this just another example of two gospel writers telling the same stories but in a different order? I for one don't think so. I actually think both events happened at different times. Why, Because the timings are so different. Luke tells his story at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, and at the end of what happened the disciples left their boats and followed Jesus. In John's version we are right at the end of the Jesus' ministry and what followed was a very individual, one to one conversation between Jesus and Peter. And as we look at John's version other things pop out which support this theory. So I think both events happened – a deliberate doubling up of an event by Jesus.

So to St John's version. First of all, you have to ask what the disciples were thinking.

They had been with Jesus for three years, and had watched him teaching, healing, performing miracles, arguing with the Jewish Authorities, being betrayed, arrested, beaten (although none of them were actually close enough to witness that), killed, and then resurrected. Jesus had already appeared to the disciples twice so they knew he was alive. And they had received the Holy Spirit.

And seven of them led by the impetuous as ever Simon Peter, decided it was time to revert to what they used to do, and go fishing. It was as if they had decided, 'it's all over – time to return to how life used to be'. They seem to have lost their vision, their sense of purpose, very quickly. And then they had the encounter with Jesus.

Apart from the disciples didn't recognise Jesus. There's a theme here. Mary Magdalene, in the garden outside the tomb, did not recognise Jesus. The two men on the Road to Emmaus did not recognise Jesus. And now 7 of his closest disciples, these men who has spent 3 years with Jesus, didn't recognise him. And this is just a thought because I don't have an answer – I wonder what this tells us about our resurrected bodies? Are they so different that there has to be another way of being recognised? We like to think that our bodies will be healed bodies when we are resurrected – but don't forget Jesus still had nail holes in his hands and a spear wound in his side – because that was what Thomas wanted to see?

We will have to wait and see what this means, but it certainly makes me wonder why they didn't recognise Jesus.

Then there is an odd detail in the story. After casting their nets on the other side they caught 153 fish. Why 153? Well, if you were to research this you would find many, and I mean many, theories as to the meaning of 153. Pythagoras himself said the relevance was that it was a triangular number – being the sum of all integers between 1 and 17. And apparently that is important. Other people break down the number to mean all sorts of things. My theory is that 153 is simply the number of fish they caught, and any meaning beyond that is irrelevant. 153 fish was a lot, and 153 fish should have broken their nets, and they didn't, hence another miracle by Jesus. But one thing about the 153 fish. If this had been the same encounter as Luke described, and 153 was important, would not Luke had included that detail?

All of which brings us, past breakfast on the beach – fish not surprisingly – to that conversation between Peter and Jesus.

'When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" "Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my lambs."

I wonder what Jesus actually meant by his question. Well going back to the original Greek shows us two possibilities. Simon, do you love me more than going back to fishing? Or Simon do you love me more than the other disciples love me? Don't forget, Impetuous Simon was back – having randomly decided to go fishing, taking some of the disciples with him. And perhaps Jesus was recognising this and testing him. Simon Peter gives a much more vague response. Yes Lord, you know that I love. Feed my lambs. That favourite analogy of Jesus as the Good Shepherd returns and the first suggestion to Simon Peter as to what his role will be – Feed my lambs. Peter will act as a shepherd in Jesus' place, yet the lambs belong not to him, but to Jesus. No response yet from Simon Peter though so Jesus carries on.

"Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep." Almost the same question but simpler – those three words, 'more than these' have been dropped. But the sheep that Jesus is referring to have always been, in John's gospel, Jesus' disciples. So Simon Peter's role now is to also officially care for the disciples. But again Jesus doesn't wait for Peter to accept his commission.

"The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my sheep. Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go." Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, "Follow me!"

The question here is why was Peter hurt?

Was it because Jesus didn't believe him, or because Peter was reminded by Jesus, at the third time of asking, that he had denied Jesus three times? It was all set up to remind Peter. Cooking the fish on the fire on the beach – where was Peter when he denied Jesus – by the fire with the guards.

But Jesus wasn't being vindictive. Jesus was saying to Peter I know you messed up but that's behind us. I know you are usually impetuous and unpredictable but I think you have now, today, changed, and you are now ready to do what I have known all along that you will do – Feed my sheep. The church whose job is to spread the word about me, is your responsibility, and I know you can do it. Failure is behind you. Ministry is ahead of you. You can move on.

Have you ever been there? Have you ever given up on Jesus and perhaps still feel bad about it? Well what the restoration of Peter tells us is that we shouldn't ever stop because we have made mistakes in the past. We all have and we all will again, and Jesus understands that – after all it was his Father who created us – warts and all.

So there we have it. We have Paul, previously an evil man, a persecutor of Jesus' followers, becomes the man who spreads the good news about Jesus. And we have Peter, the man of many mistakes, the specialist in putting his foot in it, becoming the man on whom Jesus builds his church.

And then we have us who try and learn from these examples, because in the same way that Jesus called Paul on the road to Damascus, and called Peter, on the beach over a breakfast of fish, he is calling us in this place, today.

And Jesus' last words recorded in John's gospel reading were? "Follow Me!"

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, thank you for these amazing stories about two of the most powerful, passionate, followers of you in all of history. Will you help us to learn from them – not just from the good things they did but from the mistakes they made. Help us to realise that not even Paul and Peter were perfect followers of you, so the fact that we aren't either shouldn't stop us from continuing to do what we are doing. We ask this, today, in this place, in the precious name of Jesus. Amen.