

You haven't caught any fish, have you?

John 21:1-23

Have you ever been where Peter was that day – when he said, *I'm going out to fish*? I'm not referring to the Galilean lake-shore – but to the place of confusion and failure; of heart-sickness, because you know you've let the Lord down; of uncertainty as to whether he'll ever again entrust you with his work; of not knowing what to do next? Except to do what you've always done in the past – the safe and ordinary – and do it with your mates, your best friends.

If so, then this chapter 21 – this epilogue to John's Gospel – is for you. In it the Lord speaks to us lovingly by an acted parable, and by words of challenge – to draw us closer to him, to reassure us of his love and forgiveness, and to set our feet once again on the path he has for us to walk in.

Jesus RECALLS us to reality.

That night they caught nothing. I expect most of us know what it feels like to fail. To fail to achieve some hoped-for goal; to fail in some task assigned to us; to fail in some relationship with another person. Sometimes our failure relates to expectations others have laid upon us – sometimes it relates to our own hopes. Sometimes it is through no fault of ours – circumstances beyond our control have prevented us. Yet we may still feel deeply our failure, and be marked by it for a long, long time.

Sometimes we fail because it ***has*** been ***our fault***. Maybe, like Peter, we've got to learn the painful lesson that we'd not reckoned with our own weakness. Or, like Peter, we've sinned and denied our Lord in the sight of others. Now, although ***we've confessed this sin*** – asked and received our Lord's forgiveness – as I believe Peter had done (*Lk 24:34*) – ***we still lack understanding*** of Christ's way ahead for us – and how our failure will affect our future. We stand in need of the strengthening and challenging love of the One who loves us more than we can know!

For ***out of his great love for us***, our Lord has gone that way before us. For our forgiveness, he went the way of apparent failure, of fear,

of powerlessness, pain, humiliation, and nakedness. He knows what it is to cry out, *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* (Matt 27:46) So let us set our hearts at rest... *whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.* (1 John 3:20)

In the early dawn light a man calls out to the seven weary and dejected fishermen. ***Lads, you haven't caught any fish, have you?*** The question is so phrased that it expects their laconic, ***No***. The first step in our restoration – is to acknowledge and confront our own failure – to hand it over to our Lord – and not to hide away from him (like Adam and Eve!).

The man (who is Jesus) then calls out across the water, *Throw your net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some.* We don't know how they feel about this advice – but without hesitation they obey – and find themselves with a truly exceptional catch! John immediately recognises who the man on the shore must be, *It's the Lord!* And characteristically, it's Peter who immediately acts!

What is our Lord teaching them – and us?

1. *Apart from me, you can do nothing!* (John 15:5) He'd told them this, the night of his betrayal, in the parable of the vine. *Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself: it must remain in the vine.* ***How do we remain in him?*** This occasion illustrates how – we must do as he instructs us. 'Doing our own thing' will be fruitless – but submitting to his direction, seeking his will in all our endeavours, loving him and seeking his glory, not our own, and relying on him in everything – is surely the way.

2. *Remember how I called you at first!* (Jonah 3:1) Once before Jesus had directed their fishing after a night of failure (Luke 5:1-11) and had provided them with an exceptional catch. At that time, Peter had fallen at Jesus' knees and said, *Go away from me, sir; I am a sinful man!* – but Jesus had replied, *Don't be afraid; from now on you will catch men.* And immediately, Peter, James and John had left everything and followed Jesus.

Sometimes Jesus impresses on us a very clear call – and we either don't recognise it, or we run away from it. Only after going our own way – maybe for years – do we discover how this ends in frustration – and we heed the call he made to us originally. ***Jesus told the story of two sons.*** (Matt 21:28-32) To each the father said, *Son, go and work today in the vineyard.* The first said, *I won't*, but later changed his mind and went. The second said, *I will*, but didn't go. ***Which son***, said Jesus, ***did what his father wanted?*** *The first*, said his listeners. That parable spoke to me, and was one of the words that drew me into the ministry – years after Jesus had first challenged me.

Of course, Jesus' challenge doesn't just apply to so-called Christian work. It refers to whatever he has asked us to do for him, according to our opportunities and the circumstances he has placed us in. But, ***as a church, we need to hear those words, Throw out the net...*** The business of these men – and of ourselves – is to tell others of Jesus' love, his dying for them, and his call to them to become his disciples! And if we do so, he – and he alone – will enable us to bring them successfully to Jesus.

Jesus REASSURES us of his love and forgiveness.

When the men come ashore – what do they see? A welcoming fire with fish cooking on it, and some bread. Jesus says to them, *Bring some of the fish you've just caught.* Is this so there'll be enough for them all? Yes, I think so, but perhaps ***there is more to it*** than just that. Our fishing is to be empowered by Jesus – but at the end of the day ***he will acknowledge our partnership with him***, and welcome us into his joy! (Matt 25:21) Paul said of his converts, that they were his joy and crown, his glory on the day of Christ's return! (1 Thess 2:19; 2 Cor 1:14; Php 2:16;4:1)

Now Jesus says to these men, *Come and have breakfast.* Jesus is concerned for our work in his service – but much more for our fellowship with him. In the East a shared meal has great significance. It implies welcome, acceptance, intimacy – and, if there's been a rift – reconciliation. ***Jesus is demonstrating that he has forgiven them*** – the past is over, this is a new beginning. And,

to make this even more real, **he himself** brings to each one the bread and then the fish. It's what Jesus did at the feeding of the five thousand. (*John 6:11*) And there's a promise of fellowship and intimacy whenever **we** accept his invitation and come humbly to him (*Rev 3:20*). Until that wonderful day when we shall all eat together with him! (*Matt 26:29; Luke 12:37*)

Do you recall what Jesus said to Martha, about her sister Mary, who was spending time in Jesus' presence, listening to his teaching? *Mary has chosen what is better.* (*Luke 10:42*) We can become very busy in the Lord's service – yet neglect to spend time with him!

Jesus RESTORES us to his service.

All of these things, presented to us in this acted parable, are now made explicit in Jesus' conversation with Peter. John says this happened after the meal was over, but doesn't say where. Only at the end does it appear that Jesus and Peter are walking away, with John following some distance behind. Jesus' three-fold question is, no doubt, meant to correspond to Peter's three-fold denial – but Jesus' purpose was not to shame Peter, but to rehabilitate him. It was enough that Peter's confession of love should be heard by Jesus, for the proof would be seen in all his life thereafter!

The very setting, by a charcoal fire, must have reminded Peter of that other time. And the way Jesus addressed him – not as Peter – but as *Simon, son of John*. Jesus had called him Peter (*Rock*) when he'd confessed that Jesus was *the Messiah, the Son of the living God* (*Matt 16:16*) and Jesus had gone on to say, *On this rock I will build my church..* The implication of using his old name, is that the **Lord can only build his church on those who confess his name**, not on those who deny it! So Jesus is saying, in effect, *Where do you stand with me now, Simon..?*

The first time Jesus asks him, he goes on to say, *Do you truly love me more than these?* Earlier Peter had, *Even if all fall away, I will not*, and *Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.* (*Matt 26:33,35*) His assertion of a greater loyalty than the other disciples, surely accounts for our Lord's wording. Twice more Jesus asks, **Do**

you love me? and three times Peter replies, *You know that I love you.* John varies the word used for *love*, perhaps to emphasise that Jesus looks for a self-sacrificing love, but this variation is probably just stylistic, as Aramaic has just one word to express love, as English and French do.

On the third time of asking, **Peter is deeply pained** – the word is that used of a woman in childbirth – and says, *Lord, you know all things, you know that I love you!* Even though it is early morning, we can imagine perhaps the sweat pouring down his face. But out of his anguish, Jesus is seeking to bring something positive to birth.

In response to Peter's declaration of love, three times Jesus entrusts him with the task of caring for Jesus' sheep. The fisherman now has to become a shepherd, because *fish die when they are caught, but sheep must be fed and cared for* – an ongoing task.

Jesus REMINDS us of the cost.

The conversation is not yet over. Jesus has a serious and solemn word for Peter, telling him that one day he would be called upon to lay down his life for the sheep. Then he adds, **Follow me!** To follow Jesus is to go the way of the cross. We are reminded that Jesus said, *The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world, will keep it for eternal life.* (*John 12:25*)

Not surprisingly, Peter wants to know about John, **Lord, what about him?** It's a temptation to us all, to be comparing our lives and situations with those of others. But Jesus replies, *What is that to you? You – you, yourself, follow me!* And he says it to us all!

The wonderful, good news of the gospel is that **in Jesus we may begin again**, the slate wiped clean. Who we are or what we've done are not significant.

Let's remind ourselves again what this involves:

1. First, **we must face up to our past**, as Jesus made Peter do. Forgiveness only becomes possible when we do. As John wrote, *If we walk in the light, as God is in the light, we have fellowship*

with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin...If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive us our sins, and purify us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:7,9)

2. **We must fall in love again with Jesus.** Jesus did not say, *Simon son of John, are you sorry for what you did? From now on will you be more faithful?* No, Jesus asked, **Do you love me?** That is **the essential question.** Yes, faith in Jesus demands that we know enough about Jesus to be sure of who he is, so that we may put our trust in him.

But what is required is not that we say, *Yes, I understand..* or even, *Yes, I believe..* but, *Yes, Lord, I love you and want you to come into my life for always!* That is our true response to his invitation, *Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me. (Rev 3:20)* Our love for Jesus, and his love for us, will alone sustain us when the way is hard, and the task he has given us seems unrewarding.

3. **We must accept a task.** Love for Jesus always involves doing something for him. In particular, loving him means loving others. Self-centred worship has no meaning. **If we truly love Jesus, we shall love others.** For Peter that task meant caring for Jesus' flock. We too are called to care for one another (1 Cor 12:25). Caring is not just for pastors, but for us all. Such caring may be costly. For Peter it involved dying on a cross. Love that is not costly, is not love.
4. **We are to follow Jesus.** That is our calling. Not to compare ourselves with others, but to keep our eyes on Jesus alone. (Heb 12:2) He is our pattern, and he has a way for each of us to follow. The glorious thing is that we do not walk that way alone. **He goes with us every step of the way,** living in us by his Spirit, giving us the willingness and the strength to do his will.

So, let's entrust ourselves to him, our living, loving, risen Lord, and follow him! Amen.

A popular hymn when I was a young Christian:

I do not know what lies ahead,
The way I cannot see;
Yet one stands near to be my guide,
He'll show the way to me:

*I know who holds the future, and he'll guide me with his hand,
With God things don't just happen, ev'rything by him is planned;
So as I face tomorrow with its problems large and small,
I'll trust the God of miracles, give to him my all.*

I do not know how many days
Of life are mine to spend;
But one who knows and cares for me
Will keep me to the end:

I do not know the course ahead,
What joys and griefs are there;
But one is near who fully knows,
I'll trust his loving care: