

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**  
**WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**  
**Reflection – 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Easter – 1<sup>st</sup> May 2022**

*Jane Quarmby, Reader*

Looking at John's gospel reading for today, I was taken back to holidays in my childhood, always spent fishing in Scotland. The family was woken up at an unearthly hour, rods, dog, and family piled into the car and deposited on the bank of the loch, smelling of gorse and that unique reedy, peaty tang as the mist over the water cleared and the sun rose. If we were lucky, we'd have fresh trout cooked over the campfire for breakfast. So for me this account of Jesus appearing for the third time to his disciples felt familiar. Although at the age of 7, I had nothing else to do but play all day – not for me at that time anything deeper!

Unlike the apostles and particularly Peter. John in his gospel, written with the benefit of a long period of time afterwards, has given it much thought and applied the wisdom of hindsight: and so we find many loose ends tied up, and echoes of previous events.

Peter, not sure what's going to happen next, gets tired of hanging about and basically says, "Right, let's get back to work" and so they go back to their fishing. Religious leaders in those days had a full time job as well as their preaching and studying, and it was time for Peter and the others to earn some income. But despite going out in their boat and despite their lifelong experience of fishing and knowledge of the lake it seems an odd thing to do, they caught nothing all night. Bread and fish were the staple diet so this was a real worry.

Then the mysterious stranger on the shore, who has found both bread and fish, quietly cooking on the fire, calls to them, and following his advice they cast out their nets again and catch a record number of fish. An echo of a previous miracle of Jesus involving bread and fish when he fed the five thousand. It's only the disciple Jesus loved who realises at once who it is, but it's the ever impetuous Peter

who leaps over the side and heads to shore. He can't wait for the boat to get to shore to see his Lord. Interestingly, he gets dressed first. Is this a sign of his respect for Jesus, his Lord? It's certainly an echo of Adam in Genesis, needing to cover his nakedness before God.

The disciples, relying on their own knowledge and work, have caught nothing, it's only when Jesus gets involved that they catch more than they ever thought their nets could hold. But it's also important to realise from this account that whilst our efforts without Jesus are nothing to write home about, he is perfectly capable of achieving miracles without us. It's a sobering thought! Many of us who did the Lent course took from it a heightened awareness of the need for us as Christians to take action, to really be the hands and feet of Christ, to be the "doers" here on earth, tackling the evils and the problems in the world today. But what this scene by the lake shows us is that in fact it isn't all down to us – we need the direction and support of Christ to do any good at all. Otherwise we end up like Peter, jumping in without thought, getting soaked, and having to go back and do it properly. Jesus didn't need them to provide him with the fish and bread, he already had them, grilling nicely. He doesn't need us to provide for him, but we need him to provide for us. It's a humbling thought. Made even more humbling by the fact that Jesus served his apostles their breakfast – once again, the servant king.

Having served breakfast, Jesus then turns to Peter and in an echo of the events in the courtyard before the death of Jesus that must still be giving Peter nightmares – the fire around which they are all sitting, the dawn breaking and no doubt every cockerel within hearing distance crowing, we get three questions. Not this time, "aren't you a follower of Jesus" to which Peter had to his everlasting shame replied "no", but "do you love me?". Jesus gives him, not punishment for denying him, but one of the most beautiful examples of rehabilitation that has ever been recorded. The opportunity to cancel his threefold denial with a threefold affirmation of his love. Peter (as ever) doesn't quite get it and is hurt by being asked so often; but Jesus is asking him to examine himself, to be sure of what he is being asked to take on, because he is about to give him the care of his flock, huge responsibility fraught with danger and ultimately suffering and self-sacrifice.

I know on an infinitesimally tiny scale, the difficulties we face in finding someone to look after our menagerie of sheep, cows, birds, dogs and cat just to go on holiday.

We need someone to be kind, reliable, know when and how much to feed, water, exercise, protect from harm and wolves, give medication when required, get the vet if needed, make sure everyone is safe and happy, look after the sappy old dog who pines, the lambs with no regard for health and safety sliding down the walls, etc etc. It's a rare individual who can cover all these options with energy and good sense. Would Peter have been a contender for me? My issues pale into insignificance compared with being entrusted with the fledgling Christian movement with all its problems to face and the sheer scale of reaching the whole world with the gospel.

Jesus always referred to himself as the Good Shepherd, and he did lay down his life for his sheep. Now he is putting Peter into his shoes as the shepherd of his much loved flock. Peter, with all his impetuosity, mistakes, and huge heart, is to take over. He is to feed the sheep and to care for them. To his credit, Peter doesn't hesitate now or refuse. The care of Christ's flock is handed over. Christ's forgiveness of Peter's betrayal is publicly shown for all to see. Peter is empowered to do this daunting work – Jesus has confidence in him.

Jesus has taken a fisherman, a man used to working with his hands, not a highly educated rabbi or wealthy individual with power, to be his shepherd. It's a striking example again of how God uses the least expected people to do the most extraordinary things. Peter might not have been everyone's first choice, but he loyally rose to the challenge and faithfully cared for the flock, learning all the time, making mistakes, but with the Holy Spirit guiding him, cemented the foundations of the Christian faith. He used the power given to him wisely, generously, kindly and without holding back, and his faith showed the way for millions after him. His exuberance and strength became pluses, not minuses.

God picking the most unlikely people to do his work is also shown in the conversion of Paul, depicted in our reading from Acts. This young man was on a personal crusade to stamp out the fledgling Christian movement and was well trained for it – he had all the learning of the scriptures, all the zeal of a fanatic as he sought out the members of Christ's flock to destroy them and it. He brought fear, persecution and death with him and had boundless energy on his self-appointed mission. He showed no mercy. Yet it was him that Jesus chose to be the apostle to the Gentiles, to take the gospel to foreigners and to do it well. It took a direct approach from

Jesus on the way to Damascus but once done, Paul's training, education and experience enabled him to play a unique role in taking the gospel to the wider world. He was turned completely around, and now it was the very same qualities which had made him such a ruthless opponent that made him such a powerful apostle and preacher. He was such a compelling speaker that he blazed a trail for Christianity throughout the known world.

It just goes to show that nothing is impossible for God. No-one is beyond the power of God to reach, to redeem and to use for his own purposes. That goes for all of us – with God's help we can do more than we ever dreamed possible or likely.

Amen.