

SERMON EASTER 3 14 April 2013

Acts 9: 1-6

Ps 20

Revelation 5: 6-14a

John 21: 1-19

In the name of God, who forgives, redeems and blesses us. Amen.

There are some weeks when preparing the sermon takes the preacher on a long ramble through the arcane paths of biblical criticism. This was one such week. Prompted by a simple question: 'Why 153 fish? Would 154 be too many and 152 too few?', I delved into the commentators on John's Gospel and the ever-expanding resources of the internet.

What a treasure trove! So many extraordinary theories! Who needs Ripley's 'Believe It or Not!' when we have the Internet. There seems to be general agreement that the precision of the number means that it has a particular significance. Otherwise, the scholars argue, the Gospel would simply say, as it does in a few other places when precision is not important, 'about 150' or 'just over 150'.

But what that particular significance is, is up for grabs. Some of the explanations were limpid in their clarity, suggesting that the number was counted out because the catch was so rich and the actual number was put it in the text. Others, usually accompanied by glorious geometric diagrams, posited numerological solutions: it is $3 \times 3 \times 17$. Three represents the Trinity, 17 is $10 + 7$, both numbers of completeness, wholeness. Or, 153 is a triangular number, the sum of the integers from 1 to 17 inclusive. And, as we know, 17 is the sum of 10 and 7, both numbers of completeness or wholeness. Or, stay with me here, as another writer pointed out, 153 has the rare property of being the sum of the cubes of its own digits, so if you cube 1 and add it to the cube of 5 (125), and then add the cube of 3 (27), you get – yes! 153. There was also some discussion, which frankly I didn't quite get to grips with, about 153 being significant in Greek thought at the time for being one of the two numbers in the closest fraction then known to the true value of the square root of three.

Other scholars took a different approach to the 153 fish, suggesting that they represent the nations of the earth, symbolically gathered up by Jesus with the help of the disciples, or that 153 were directly blessed by Jesus during his earthly ministry.

All in all, the fruit of this excursion was abundant but, alas, far from definitive. There seemed to be no compelling answer to my initial question of 'why 153 fish?'. There was, however, a theme weaving through almost all of the proposed explanations, however arcane – and that is the theme of abundance. This was, by any stretch of the imagination, an extremely large catch of fish for those days, straining the nets as it was landed. Not only that, but it was found where there had apparently been no fish at all a little earlier. And, in the presence of Jesus, this large catch was safely landed.

Today's Gospel reading also contains the story of the encounter between the risen Jesus and Peter: the story where Peter's threefold denial on the night of Jesus' trial is undone by Jesus with a threefold questioning. The shame of Peter's repeated denial on that searing night is symbolically overridden by Peter's repeated protestations of love. The symbolic action here seems psychologically and spiritually right. Peter became exasperated and hurt by the threefold questioning but it matched and healed the damage done by his denial.

Mind you, Peter is not the only one present that morning by the Sea of Galilee (the Sea of Tiberias was the Roman name) whose discipleship record was a bit wonky. Thomas, called the twin, was the same Thomas who insisted on seeing the scars. The sons of Zebedee were James and John, the two who had said that they wanted to sit beside Jesus in glory (Mk 10:35-45) – slight misunderstanding of the big picture there!

But this rag tag band of people who had missed the point continually, who had failed Jesus at specific moments, nonetheless were his chosen friends. For those of us who are less than perfect, this is very reassuring.

In the presence of Jesus, there is abundance and redemption.

Peter is not just redeemed in this encounter, not simply brought back explicitly into relationship with Jesus, he is also given a task – to nurture the flock. His love for Jesus is to be worked out in the world through the care of those whom Jesus loves. His life is to have focus. If we follow the story of Saul the persecutor, from the moment of his experience on the road to Damascus, described so vividly in the first reading, to his reinvention as Paul, missionary and theologian, we see a similar trajectory of divine forgiveness, redemption and purpose.

In the presence of Jesus, there is abundance, redemption and purpose.

Do we live this way? As followers of Christ today, is this what we expect of life? Do we live with the confidence and generosity of spirit that such a conviction would give us? I think the short answer is - sometimes.

As I wrestle with my own failings in this area I occasionally find myself doing an 'if only' - 'If only I ran into Jesus while I was out in the boat and there were no fish (or whatever my 21st century equivalent might be), then I would feel confident, then I would believe in abundance, redemption and purpose'; or 'if only Jesus would wander in and offer to show me his scars when I am feeling doubtful, I too, like Thomas, would be transformed'.

But we know that God is love and where love is, there too is God. Where love is, there too is abundance, redemption and purpose. Our ordinary human experience of love can show us these characteristics, these aspects of love. Even abusive relationships can hold within them some love, however distorted - indeed it is this love which often keeps people within an abusive relationship despite the pain they also experience.

The 'if onlys' often mask a hesitation, a fear, a desire to hold back a little. We can be unwilling to let go completely of a sense that we can pull back, protect ourselves. If we throw in our lot completely with God, with Jesus, we might be betrayed somehow. But the whole story of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus is that we have betrayed God, not the other way round.

And having betrayed God, we are met, not with condemnation but with abundance, redemption and purpose, as both Peter and Paul were met with abundance, redemption and purpose. Amen.

Sarah Macneil
April 2013