

## A story of growing up

A sermon preached by Revd William Whyte on the Third Sunday of Easter, 1 May 2022

*Refs: Acts 9. 1-6; Revelation 5.11-14; John 21.1-19*

One of the most convincing parts of the Resurrection stories in the Gospels is just how weird they are. Jesus appears and disappears; walks through walls yet eats food; is recognizable and then utterly mysterious. It's a collection of confused and sometimes confusing narratives. As the highly sceptical scholar Geza Vermes observes in one of his studies of the subject, it's clear that something happened. If they'd tried to fake the Resurrection, to make something up, then they'd have made a far better job of it, and got their story straight. Instead, we get all these contradictions, ambiguities, and half-remembered, half-misunderstood events.

To be fair, the Gospel writers do their best to make it hang together – not least by including details that are intended to evoke memories of earlier events. In today's Gospel, the fish on the beach remind us of the feeding of the 5,000. The meal with the risen Lord is an echo of the Last Supper before the Crucifixion. There's even a hint – and more than a hint – here of yet earlier Biblical themes. Peter, naked, hears the Lord and, like Adam, is ashamed of his nakedness.

It's a telling analogy because, a little like the Story of Adam and Eve, this too is a **story of growing up**. Tellingly, towards the start of this Gospel passage, Jesus greets the disciples as 'Children'. Towards the end, he prophesies Peter's death. In between, we can witness something both profound and profoundly sad, as Peter comes to terms with the nature of the Resurrection with the cosmic change he's witnessing. It's a bitter-sweet moment.

On the one hand, here is his Lord, his leader, the man he followed and loved and thought was dead. Jesus lives. His appearance is a miracle, a thing more wonderful than Peter could ever possibly have dreamed or hoped for. Yet, on the other hand, this risen Lord is somehow strange, somehow different. He asks Peter not once, not twice, but three times '*Do you love me?*' No wonder Peter is hurt. It's not just that this pattern of three echoes the three times that he denied Christ on the night before the Crucifixion. It's also that Peter again and again reassures him, '*You know that I love you*', and, again and again, gets a mysterious answer in return: '*Feed my lambs*'; '*Feed my sheep*.' And, again and again, comes that question, '*Do you love me?*'

For Peter there must have been the dawning realization that, however wonderful the Resurrection, it will not bring back his old life. Jesus is changed. He is now more mysterious, more powerful. In some ways, he's also more distant. This will change their relationship and change Peter, because he is charging him with a task. Jesus asks him to take up a new role, to become a leader. Peter will become the shepherd of the sheep. It's an awesome responsibility.

In some respects, much Christian life is a little like Peter's experience. Some are terrified by an encounter with God – they feel naked and ashamed. Some are disappointed. God seems too vague, too mysterious, too far away. Some think God asks too much. Some

that God gives too little. In this passage, Peter's experience captures half a dozen different ways in which people find faith tough. I suspect all of us have felt all of this at some point or other.

What's so remarkable, so heroic about Peter is that this moment – however puzzling, however disturbing, however disappointing – transforms his life. For all his sadness, he does grow up. He becomes the shepherd. He becomes the leader. He follows Christ's call even though he knows it will lead to his death.

To some extent, what this does is to re-confirm the extraordinary impact of the Resurrection on those that that witnessed it. They may not have been able to make much sense of it. They may have found it disturbing – even upsetting. But it changed their lives forever.

More profoundly, more personally, what Peter's experience should do is challenge us. We may fear that God is far away. We may feel that God's message is hard or opaque or something worse. But, as Christians, we are called to imitate Peter. To overcome our doubts. To grow in faith. To face our fears and answer Christ's questions over and over again. *'Do you love me?'* he asks. *'If you do, then how do I know?'* Like Peter, let us so live that the answers to those questions shine forth for all to see, now and always.

**Amen.**