

## Surf and turf

### *John 21:1-19*

After this, Jesus appeared once more to his disciples at Lake Tiberias. This is how it happened. Simon Peter, Thomas (called the Twin), Nathanael (the one from Cana in Galilee), the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples of Jesus were all together. Simon Peter said to the others, "I am going fishing." "We will come with you," they told him. So they went out in a boat, but all that night they did not catch a thing. As the sun was rising, Jesus stood at the water's edge, but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Then he asked them, "Young men, haven't you caught anything?" "Not a thing," they answered. He said to them, "Throw your net out on the right side of the boat, and you will catch some." So they threw the net out and could not pull it back in, because they had caught so many fish. The disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Peter heard that it was the Lord, he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken his clothes off ) and jumped into the water. The other disciples came to shore in the boat, pulling the net full of fish. They were not very far from land, about a hundred yards away. When they stepped ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there with fish on it and some bread. Then Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish you have just caught." Simon Peter went aboard and dragged the net ashore full of big fish, a hundred and fifty-three in all; even though there were so many, still the net did not tear. Jesus said to them, "Come and eat." None of the disciples dared ask him, "Who are you?" because they knew it was the Lord. So Jesus went over, took the bread, and gave it to them; he did the same with the fish. This, then, was the third time Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from death. After they had eaten, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these others do?" "Yes, Lord," he answered, "you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Take care of my lambs." A second time Jesus said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" "Yes, Lord," he answered, "you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Take care of my sheep." A third time Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter became sad because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" and so he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you!" Jesus said to him, "Take care of my sheep. I am telling you the truth: when you were young, you used to get ready and go anywhere you wanted to; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will tie you up and take you where you don't want to go." (In saying this, Jesus was indicating the way in which Peter would die and bring glory to God.) Then Jesus said to him, "Follow me!"

(John 21:1-19 GNB)

### **Part 1 - Surf**

Jesus has left them again. Just when the disciples were getting used to the idea of him not being dead, he goes and leaves them again. With time weighing on their hands, Peter comes up with an eminently sensible suggestion.

"Let's go fishing," he says, confident that like riding a bike, he won't have forgotten how to do it! However, this time they weren't successful. Even though they were out all night, dropping their net over the side of the boat, the fish aren't to be caught. Through the night they persevere, but the fish aren't interested in leaving the sanctuary of the lake until day breaks, the first light appearing over the hills bordering the lake.

Tired, possibly annoyed at the 'ones that got away', the disciples are hailed from the shore. "Hey lads!" the voice comes over the water. "Got any meat?" A silly question, really. If they'd had any joy then they wouldn't still be in the water as dawn approached. Also, even if they had caught anything and stayed out on the lake, the boat would be riding lower in the water. Is it any surprise that their reply is short and curt, shorn of all courtesy?

Then comes the potentially insulting and patronising piece of advice; drop the net over the other side! OK, so what difference would that make? Except... a memory is triggered... They did this once before. They had previously had an unsuccessful fishing trip and someone had given them the same advice. Someone special. Someone unique. And then something special had happened. Could it be happening again? It's worth a try!

Then comes the slapping and wriggling of fish, dozens of them, teeming in the net, stretching the cords that keep them contained. A sight, smell and sound that brings joy to their hearts. But nothing like the joy that comes to one of them as he realises who it is on the beach. "It's the Lord," he realises. But they weren't expecting to see him. That's why they had gone fishing. But he had sought them out. And saved them again.

"It's the Lord!" goes the cry as Peter, impetuous, feet first, brain later Peter hurriedly dresses himself and plunges over the side to reach the man on the shore. The others follow at a more measured pace, first making sure that their enormous haul is safely stowed in the boat.

They arrive to find Peter and Jesus on the shore and what's this? Did Jesus know what the outcome would be? He must have, because there's a barbecue ready; coals glowing, missing only something to cook on it. The disciples are ready to offer their fish, grateful to eat something so fresh after a seemingly wasted night.

Jesus, the master barbecue chef rustles up some unleavened rolls and kosher condiments and away they go. The sunrise meal, the first that Jesus shares with his disciples since that fateful meal in the upper room what feels like a lifetime ago...

So, what do we learn about this? Peter and a few of the other disciples' careers before Jesus first called them had been as fishermen. It could have just been an economic decision; they need to live and as the celebrity circus of first century AD wasn't as developed as it is now, there were no chat shows or glossy magazines to sell their stories to. Fishing was and still is a very common and profitable practice; between January and March this year, just less than 129,000 tonnes of fish have been caught in British waters, at a value of just under £148 million!

It could also just have been a way of passing the time. Again, this is something that they wouldn't be alone with nowadays. Socially, there are over 130,000 people fishing week in, week out in England. But there's more to this fishy story than meets the eye.

Firstly, Jesus had performed this particular miracle before. In Luke 5, Jesus introduces himself to Peter, James and John by proving his command even over the fish of the sea. As in this story, the fish hadn't been attracted to Peter's fishing method previously and yet at a word from Jesus out they came in droves! Maybe this latest miracle was a reminder that just because he'd died he's still the same Jesus.

And after the miracle comes the revelation. It's the Lord! This man, this stranger on the shore, this vague shape in the distance speaks with authority and power. It's the Lord! A simple command that must be obeyed. An unspoken need that is met. It's the Lord! The disciples

didn't ask him for advice or assistance but he knew their needs. Not just the need for success, to avoid having to go back empty-handed, but also for breakfast, the basic need to provide the means to survive. It's the Lord!

And this is Jesus we're talking about. In providing the menu and cooking tools, he also provides the excuse to spend time in his presence. It's the Lord!

So what about us? Do we spend enough time listening to Jesus? Do we acknowledge that Jesus is as interested in our everyday lives as in our 'church' lives? Do we obey his commands? Do we do them knowing with all the joy and conviction that the disciples showed? "It's the Lord!"

## ***Part 2 – Turf***

Let's focus on Peter for the second part of today's service. Peter, probably the most popular of the disciples, certainly the one that you hear a lot of people compare themselves to. Impetuous, forthright, a man who wears his heart on his rough sewn sleeve. A man who always tries to please, keen to let people know that he's around. Whether it's providing a boat so that Jesus can preach to the masses on the shore or shooing away children who want to be with Jesus, Peter's at the forefront. His time with Jesus is categorised by some heady highs and desperate lows. Usually the latter following closely behind the former. Many weeks could be taken up preaching about Peter's 'oops' moments, the greatest of which had taken place not that many days prior to the events in the story today.

Peter, the Rock on whom Jesus said he would build his church (Matt 16:18), the one who was willing to wield a dagger against those who would arrest Jesus (John 18:10), had then publicly denied even knowing him! Jesus had predicted this and, as with everything that Jesus predicted about that time, it had come true.

I can't imagine what Peter must have gone through once Jesus had died. How could he apologise? What relief he must have felt when he first heard about the resurrection! No wonder he was in such a hurry to check out the empty tomb when Mary came back (John 20:3,4). How amazing it must have been to actually see him again so soon afterwards! And then Thomas muscled in with his doubts before Peter can get a private chat with Jesus.

Finally, he gets his chance! What must Peter have thought about that first encounter alone with Jesus? Will he get the chance to say sorry? Will he be able to look Jesus in the face again? Will the look of disappointment be too painful to bear? Would he be able to justify himself; after all he had only done what Jesus had said he would do! Also, what else could he have done; surely a cowardly but alive Peter was better than a courageous but very dead one? Put yourself in my sandals, he might have been thinking, what would Jesus do?

However, we can only speculate as to Peter's thinking because it is Jesus who once again leads the way. And what a question: "Simon, do you love me?" We can spend hours debating the different types of the word 'love' that John records in the original version, but the point is simple. "Do you love me more than these other do?" is a straightforward challenge. Compare yourself to these others and how do you measure up? Consider that among those Jesus is referring to is the one called 'The disciple whom Jesus loved' and that's quite a qualification! If the answer was judged on actions then denying someone is not the usual criteria when professing love. Just imagine if Peter was writing a 'lonely hearts' advert:

Wanted – person to share life with. GSOH, outgoing, friendly, a bit headstrong but the life and soul of any messianic revival! Interested people must like smell of fish and be able to cope with betrayal (sorry...)

Despite this, Peter's answer is as definite as he always seems to be: "Yes, Lord, you know that I do." Interesting – again speculation creeps in. Does Peter hope that Jesus hasn't heard about the betrayal? Apart from that, most of Peter's time with Jesus showed a loving bond between the two of them. Maybe Jesus hadn't heard about Peter's denial and so would only know about their previous time together.

But again, this is just speculation as Jesus doesn't laugh and say "what, you think I don't know what you did?!" He just instructs him, enigmatically, to look after his lambs. Peter, possibly expecting a rebuke, might just be a bit puzzled.

However, there's no time to ask Jesus what he means as he's at it again: "Simon, do you love me?" The same answer. Maybe a different inflection, a different word emphasised this time. I'm always reminded of the stormtrooper in the first Star Wars film with the line "Look, sir, droids!" There are so many ways of changing the effect of the line and we've always wondered if he practiced for hours trying out different tones. Maybe it was the same with Peter. "Yes, Lord, you *know* that I do." "Yes, Lord, *you* know that *I* do."

So now Jesus tells him to look after his sheep.

I have a great and probably terribly flawed mental picture of Peter's mouth opening and closing slowly as his brain tries to digest this strange exchange. Lambs... sheep... but I'm a fisherman. OK, granted not a very good one at the moment, but still a fisherman! Not a shepherd. I'll ask what he's talking about...

"Simon, do you love me?"

Back in Peter's brain (speculation once more to the fore) ...Now that's a bit irritating. There I was about to ask him what this sheep and lamb business was about and why he keeps calling me Simon, not the name he himself gave me and there he goes again! Right, I'll put him in his place once and for all.

"Master, you know everything there is to know. You've got to know that I love you." (John 21:17 The Message). Aha, got him there! Not long before he died, we had told him that we realised that he knew everything (John 16:30). Surely this must be the clincher! Surely he'll explain himself now.

More sheep! And what's this, some stuff about being tied up and led to somewhere deeply unpleasant? But at least he hasn't brought up the denial. Except, that was three times I said no and he's just asked me that question three times... It's the Lord!

Back out of Peter's brain, we can see what Jesus is getting at. In asking Peter three times Jesus is restoring him to his proper place as the rock on which the church would be built. And as a founding member of the church, Peter would be viewed as a shepherd to many, guiding them and instructing them in Jesus' teachings. Only when he was fully restored could Jesus give him responsibility for these people, his sheep and lambs.

Once forgiven, it's forgotten. Jesus moves on. Now he knows that Peter is well and truly on his side, he can give him a bit of a heads-up on the future. Not that it's going to save Peter, not that it's to be avoided, but to prepare him for when it does happen. Once again Jesus is proving

himself as the omniscient Messiah that the disciples acknowledged. If only it wasn't so painful!  
And then comes the final command – "Follow me."

Follow me through the times when nothing seems to go right  
Follow me through the times when nothing seems to happen  
Follow me through the separation, the pain of loss  
Follow me through the abuse, the surrendering of body  
Follow me through the good times, the miracles and the fish  
Follow me through the joy of time spent together  
Follow me through the privilege of teaching others my ways  
Follow me through the love that is known, not just shown  
Follow me through the cross of forgiveness  
Follow me to the glory of eternal life together  
Follow me

Will we follow him? He is, after all, the Lord!