

JOHN 21:1-19
TRANSFORMATION

Breakfast on the beach – it is a fascinating story as the risen Jesus appears to His disciples on the shore of the lake as dawn breaks after a night's fishing! Most fascinating of all is the people in the story; Jesus is at the centre of it, of course, but we also see the disciples, Peter and the others; we see their mood, their faith, and the grace with which Jesus treats them! This is the third time Jesus has appeared to His disciples after the resurrection; the two other appearances had been in the upper room in Jerusalem, behind locked doors, showing Himself to them; so then everything is sorted for the disciples; they've seen Jesus twice and all their questions are answered, their future is set out! Not quite!

Are there any absolute certainties in your life? Is there anything about which you are totally, undeniably certain and nothing will shake you from it? Is there anything about your faith that might fall into the category of absolute certainty? Something that you know and believe and nothing will shake you from that faith? Absolute certainties are good, but rare! We might think that the disciples after two resurrection appearances by Jesus might fall into that group; that they'd be absolutely sure that Jesus is raised, alive again and that life would now be shaped by that undeniable certainty in their minds. I meet people who say that they wish they could have that kind of certainty to their faith, but there are questions that remain unanswered; there are doubts in their minds; their faith is in two minds; they believe, but wish they believed more! Welcome to breakfast on the beach!

The mood: the disciples have gone to Galilee because Jesus told them to go there. We need to try to read a little between the lines; how would you describe the mood that comes out of the first part of this story? For me, there are two things: an air of uncertainty and an air disappointment run through the first part of this story. They've gone to Galilee, but nothing has happened since they've arrived; why did Jesus send them here and then not appear; "What do we do now?" So Peter suggests a night's fishing! For Peter, James and John, this is going back to something familiar, to the old ways, the old work, "we'll get the old boat out and dig out the nets and enjoy ourselves with a night's fishing"; some of the others come along; they've nothing better to do. It doesn't get much better with the fishing because they go through the night and catch nothing, so when the voice from the shore shouts "Lads, have you caught anything?" all that comes back is "No!" – how disappointed are we!

The faith: There's a curious clue in this story to something that is going on in the minds of the disciples. We might think that after two appearances of the risen Christ that everything for the disciples is good, that faith is strong and that they are simply bursting to go out into the world to serve Jesus. Here's what John tells us: "*Jesus...*" (*John 21:12*) Now, I ask myself, why is that there? On the surface, everything is grand; they know it is Jesus! So why make the comment? It seems to suggest that there is a nagging doubt, an unanswered question in their minds. They know it is the Lord, but there's something different about Him, enough to give them pause for thought, enough for them to be in two minds? We might wonder whether there is still an anxiety in their minds: how will Jesus react to them after the events in Jerusalem? After all, every one of them ran away and left Him to die alone; we focus on Peter, but none of the disciples stayed; they all ran. Are there still lingering doubts about the way in which Jesus will treat them? Is He still suspicious of their loyalty?

Breakfast on the beach is not a story of people for whom everything is absolutely certain and sure! It is not about a group of people who have all the answers to life, faith and the

universe; the disciples don't know what will happen next, what they will do now; there is a mood of uncertainty and disappointment about them. It is to them, in this situation, that Jesus comes. There is a real human quality to this story; this is how life is for us so often. Absolute certainties are rare in life; much more common is the kind of faith in which we believe, but have questions, even doubts that leave us with a feeling of uncertainty. I love the classic definition of doubt: "Doubt is faith in two minds." (Os Guinness) We tend to think of doubt as something that undermines faith, even the opposite of faith; but the opposite of faith is unbelief; doubt is faith in two minds, knowing what we believe, but with questions; knowing what we'd like to believe, but with questions.

To this uncertain, disappointed group of people Jesus comes. First of all, He is a distant figure on the shore: "*Early...*" (*John 21:4,7*) In the half-light of dawn, they are not sure who it is that shouts to them across the water, but John looks more closely and realises that it is Jesus and Peter gets down out of the boat to go to Jesus more quickly. Jesus says to them "*come...*" (*John 21:12a*) It is a very simple invitation to share the fish cooking on the fire and the bread, but it is hugely symbolic. On the face of it, it is a simple invitation to share some food together, but underneath here is Jesus inviting them to His breakfast, an invitation that just drips with acceptance and love and grace; "come to share my breakfast; come sit beside me on the beach; come be my friends again; come spend time with me; come because I love you and care for you and want you to taste that love and compassion all over again." All of that is in this simple invitation to breakfast.

We see it in an even more focussed way in the conversation that takes place after breakfast. Jesus and Peter are on their own: "*When they...*" (*John 21:15*) What does the question mean? There are two choices: first, does Peter love Jesus more than the others love Jesus? Or secondly, does Peter love Jesus more than he loves this other way of life, his fishing tackle etc? However you want to understand it (and for me it is more the first than the second), the question is all about the quality of Peter's devotion to Jesus; is his devotion to Jesus the quality that will allow him to become the leader of the disciples? Is his devotion to Jesus the quality that will allow him to remain loyal to Jesus when the going gets tough? That's the question and Jesus asks the question because the last time Peter's love for Jesus was tested, it was found wanting! The heart of Peter's future lies here, in his devotion to, and love for Jesus, the quality of his heart, the nature of his relationship with Jesus. Love and devotion to Jesus is always the first quality for faith, service and leadership.

Then the question is asked three times: "*again Jesus...*" (*John 21:16*) Three times Peter is asked to affirm his love and devotion to Jesus. Jesus takes Peter back to the night in Jerusalem when Peter stands beside another fire, keeping warm and the servant girl is the first and two others follow and three times Peter is quizzed about his relationship with Jesus and three times he denies it; "*I am not*". Now three times, he affirms his love and devotion to Jesus; three times he is faced with his past failure and three times he affirms his new sense of love and devotion; the failure is in the past! There is something else: on the third time he says: "*you know...*" (*John 21:17*) In the past, Peter had argued with Jesus; Peter had even contradicted Jesus about the need for the cross and said that the cross was not the right way; Peter contradicted Jesus when Jesus predicted Peter's denial and said he would never leave. For Peter to say "*Lord...*" (*John 21:17*) is a massive confession of faith, a massive climb-down, some real humility – "I was wrong; you were right!"

Finally, forgiveness. The word is never used here, but it is all the way through the conversation. Jesus said to Peter: *“feed my lambs... take care of my sheep”* (John 21:15f) This is Peter’s new job description; Peter is to be the leader of the disciples, to lead them and care for them; Jesus is giving Peter this new responsibility, to care for the disciples and others; it’s quite a responsibility, to be the leader and pastor of the new church. For Jesus to give Peter this job, He demonstrates that he has forgiven Peter his failures; He doesn’t say it, but His actions demonstrate it in a most powerful way! Here is Peter’s second chance, he is reinstated, forgiven. Jesus has done this for Peter and Peter has embraced it; he is a changed man.

The whole story oozes with grace. A group of people who were disappointed, frustrated and uncertain are changed, transformed. The transformation will be complete on the day of Pentecost when the Spirit comes upon them in power and they will be witnesses to the risen Jesus in Jerusalem. It begins with the way in which Jesus treats them as share breakfast on the beach. Jesus loves them as they are; He understands their confusion and uncertainty; He doesn’t blame them for it; He doesn’t shout at them for letting Him down; He doesn’t hold a grudge against them for leaving Him in the lurch; he doesn’t complain to them or about them for their failure. No; he invites them to breakfast, to share His food, to sit beside Him; He loves them and cares for them and the transformation begins! It doesn’t happen overnight; there is still a way to go, but they have begun to be new people, people of faith in the risen Jesus; they have begun to discover what it will mean to be witnesses.

It is so easy to put ourselves in this story. We know what it means to be disappointed and uncertain – for many people that is what our world is like today with redundancy, another job application rejected, another disappointment! There are issues of health and well-being; or the family future – there are so many uncertainties. The future of the Church in Scotland – there are so many questions and uncertainties. Life is full of these and other uncertainties: perhaps more than ever, life is uncertain and part of us longs for a time when life was simpler or the old certainties went unchallenged; we knew where we were in so many aspects of life. Even if life is not like that for us, it is this way for so many people in our world and our community – where will the next meal come from? How will I pay the bills? We understand these emotions and then we add in questions and doubts about faith, things we’d like to believe, but we’re not sure; the people we’d like to be, but can’t! Yet, it is to people like us that Jesus comes with His grace, to love and care for us, to accept us as we are; to work in us a sense of transformation. He changes things; He loves us and cares for us; He helps us live life; He challenges us to be witnesses.

Here’s one man’s experience of the grace of God: *“Sing to...”* (Psalm 30:4f, 11f) God has answered his prayers and has changed his life; the things that made him sad have been transformed and his heart is full of joy because God has saved him; any notion of God being angry has been taken away and favour and forgiveness are qualities to be enjoyed! Or Horatious Bonar’s slightly more modern take on the same kind of life-transforming experience of Jesus: *“I came to Jesus as I was, so weary, worn and sad; I found in Him a resting-place, and He has made me glad.”* (Hymn 540 v.1) This is no pipe dream for an exclusive few, for only those who live with absolute certainties, or people of exceptional faith and great devotion; no, this transforming grace of Jesus is for all of us. Jesus is with us in our real lives, in our uncertainties and disappointments and in His grace comes to meet us where we are and to make us new people. *“Come and have breakfast.”*