

JOHN 21:1-17
FISH AND FORGIVENESS

Who is the Church for? What kind of people is the church for? A few years ago, I was having a conversation with someone who was coming to church here then; she has since died. She had started off life in the church, grew up going to Sunday School and had started off her adult life as part of a church. She was married in church and everything was good, the road was set and church was part of her life. But then things began to go wrong: her marriage was under strain and eventually she and her husband divorced and the road she travelled was more of a struggle. She gave up going to church and was lost to the church for a long time till she started coming here and found her way again and discovered the love of Jesus for her all over again. As part of that conversation, she said to me that in these hard times, these struggles when she thought about her faults and mistakes in life and how life was not perfect, she said to me "At that time I thought that Church is not for people like me!"

Who is the Church for? Is the church for people who are "sorted" in life, whose road in life is mapped out and it is a smooth road, a happy road, we're deeply aware that Jesus is with us! Is church for people who are always good people, who never make a mistake, who never feel as if they struggle, who never know what disappointment feels like because everything is simply marvellous for them? Is that the kind of people church is for? Or is church also for people who struggle? Who lie awake at night, wondering? Who have made mistakes and get things wrong? Who are not sure what the road ahead looks like and are walking that road with faltering footsteps? "Come those whose joy is morning sun and those weeping through the night; come those who tell of battles won and those struggling in the fight" (*Come people of the risen King, v.2*) Keith Getty's words sum up the notion that church is for everyone.

What about Peter? Where does he fit in? Is church for Peter (and the other disciples too, but John's focus is on Peter!)? He is lost at the start of our story today; he's not sure what to do next! They go to Galilee because that's what Jesus has told them to do, but what to do once they get there? Are they hanging around waiting for something to happen? Are they waiting for Jesus, but He's not putting in an appearance yet? They do something familiar, comforting; they go fishing! They go out at night, the best time to go fishing, but they catch nothing, so the frustration builds even more; that's not worked and there is no sense of satisfaction from their fishing! But then in the half-light of dawn again, the stranger on the shore says "*Throw your...*" (*John 21:6*) Fisherman will not usually take advice from strangers but they have nothing to lose, so they do and there is a huge catch of fish and being good fishermen they count it – 153! John realises "*It is...*" (*John 21:7*) and that starts a chain of events that leads to fish for breakfast on the beach and a conversation with Peter that turns his life around.

"We didn't want a crucified Lord!" That might well have been Peter's view. Certainly, when Jesus spoke about His suffering and death, Peter challenged Him about it as if he didn't like the idea. But now – now Peter has a crucified Lord and a risen Lord; where does that leave him? How has that affected his relationship with Jesus? Then there's three denials to take into account, three times when Peter said "I don't know this man!" What's he supposed to think now? What's he supposed to do? We can only really imagine Peter's feelings as he meets Jesus on the beach. There must have been a moment when he considered that everything was at an end, that being a disciple was now no place for him, that the road had reached a cul-de-sac and there was no way through this; life was at a dead end for Peter!

Two things happen. First of all, there is fish. The brilliant catch of fish must have taken them back to another fishing expedition with Jesus at the very start of their friendship, the story told in Luke 5, when something very similar happens with Jesus in boat. Go home and read it and see how it is the same and how it is different. "*It is...*" (*John 21:7*) But more than the catch of fish is breakfast together. Here is Jesus on the beach and He is making breakfast! He is cooking for them; this is His hospitality. "*Jesus came...*" (*John 21:13*) Fish, breakfast,

hospitality, acceptance! Here is Jesus making a meal for His *friends*. Despite all that He's been through, despite all that they have done or not done, these disciples are still Jesus' friends; He still welcomes them to the breakfast that He is cooking and the message from breakfast is "welcome, my friends!" Peter had denied Jesus, the rest had run away; they were a motley crew, James and John ready to combust with their stormy temperaments, but for all that, still they are Jesus' friends; His grace is at work.

Let's come back to my first question: who is church for? I think you might know the answer, but this story tells me that Jesus is for everyone and the church should be for everyone too. Somehow my friend from the conversation at the start had picked up a message that Church was not for people who had made a mess of life, or who felt a failure, or whose life was not quite perfect. There was a subliminal message from church, it would never be spoken I hope, but somehow it was communicated! If Jesus is not for people who have messed up, then the disciples would not have been at breakfast with Him; He would have walked away from them and they would no longer have been His friends. Breakfast tells us that these men are loved, accepted as they are. "Jesus' love for His church remains undiminished even though church be torn, ill-clad, dirty in places, generally malnourished and diseased." (Bruce Milne) We are loved; we are invited; we are welcome – as we are! Fish!

Secondly there is a conversation. Jesus takes Peter for a walk along the beach, just the two of them on their own. What does Peter think? "This is the end; I'm being let down gently!" Perhaps he imagines that this conversation will remind him of his failings and how these failings have proved too much for Jesus, Peter has gone too far with his denials and not wanting a crucified Lord. But the conversation goes in a very different direction. "*Simon, son...*" (*John 21:15*) Three times (no coincidence there!) Jesus asks Peter the same question. We're not quite sure what the question is: there are two choices – is Jesus asking Peter if his love for Jesus is greater than the love that the others have for the Lord? Or is Jesus asking Peter if he loves Jesus more than his fishing gear? I don't suppose it matters very much. Peter's answer three times is "*Yes, Lord!*" affirming his love and the faith that he had before denied. Three times Peter is given a new charge: "*Feed my lambs/sheep!*"

Peter is being restored. Things could never be quite same again because of all that has happened: Peter's denial and Jesus crucified is out there and can't be undone, so now Peter has all of that in his heart and is now being restored. The word is not used in this conversation, but clearly there is forgiveness in Jesus' heart: He treats Peter as if Peter has done nothing wrong and loves him still. He gives Peter a task, a responsibility of leadership amongst the disciples and for their mission and we might think Peter is quite unsuited to this responsibility – "He's failed in past; He might fail again!" – but don't you think Jesus knows that; Jesus is full of grace for Peter, ready to trust him all over again. Peter is restored and recommissioned to care for people, to lead the band of disciples, to tell people the stories of Jesus and the good news of God's grace for the world in this crucified Saviour and Lord, Jesus. This is a new Peter, Peter restored; scarred Peter, but forgiven Peter, loved and accepted as he is, not only with a place in the church, but leading the church.

"Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven" (Hymn 160 v.1) How do we put that into words? Sometimes it is hard to find words to express the ways in which God has blessed us, or restored us; sometimes it is hard to accept that God forgives us when we have a keen sense of our own failure and weakness. Psalm 30 might give you a voice: it speaks so much in contrasts "*you lifted...*" (*Psalm 30:1*) "*His anger...*" (*Psalm 30:5*) Then finally there is a picture of transformation "*you turned...*" (*Psalm 30:11f*) This is one man's testimony to the ways in which God has restored him, how he is healed and forgiven by God; we read these words and they can give voice to the ways in which God has done the same things for us. He has healed us, He has forgiven us; He has helped us and our hearts are glad. There are all kinds of examples in the Bible of people in whom God has been at work to restore them, or to help

them turn around and find the road for the first time or find the road again having lost their way, the way of faith.

Who is the church for? What have now got to offer? After all, we are people like Peter! I have a book on my shelf called *The Wounded Healer*. It is a book that wrestles with ministry in a troubled world, for ministers who “question their own relevance and effectiveness.” The writer goes on to suggest that in our dislocated world ministry will work when it comes from a heart wounded by the same suffering as we see around us. It’s subtitle is “in our own woundedness, we can become a source of life for others.” Rather than be embarrassed by our experiences of life, our scars should make us more aware of the needs of others, more able to walk alongside others, more able to share the grace of God with people who are wounded by life, who are scarred by their experiences. Peter, as a leader, learns to be caring for people who were weak, humble, gracious because he remembers the road he has walked. Forgiveness!

Fish and forgiveness. Jesus made breakfast and invited His disciples, His friends to join Him; these friends who had run away, or failed, or made mistakes, but He still calls them friends. Peter made mistakes: forgiven, restored, given new leadership challenges. Who is the Church for? Who is Jesus for? People like Peter; people like us; people like those we meet everywhere we go! Jesus is our life; let’s share Him with others!