

Sermon by Canon Christopher Humphries

Sunday Cathedral Eucharist at 10am, 18th April 2010 at Chester Cathedral

Themes: Resurrection, Conviction, Conversion, Commission.

JOHN 21¹ - 19

also ACTS 9¹ - 6

We started out at midnight with the aid of our torches and ascended the steep path onto the moor above Osmotherly. A dozen of us had agreed to raise funds for St Catherine's Hospice Scarborough by attempting the 42 mile Lyke Wake walk. It's normally undertaken as a continuous walk across the North York Moors and it took us nigh on 17 hours – before, with some relief, we reached Ravenscar on the coast.

My most abiding memory from that walk was when dawn was breaking just after 4 in the morning. We had completed the first stretch of moorland and started to descend near a village called 'Chop Yat'. The twinkling lights of Middlesborough could be seen to the North and even better, the headlights of our support van could be seen as well bringing our breakfast! Never have bacon butties tasted so good!

An ordinary, plain, meal but very memorable, very sustaining, very encouraging for us as a group as we faced the next stage of the journey.

‘And Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast”.’ In St. John’s account this is the third time the risen Jesus has appeared to his disciples as a group.

Some point out that this longer passage lacks the sheer impact of the encounter of Mary Magdalene with the risen Jesus in the garden on that first Easter morning – perhaps the best loved resurrection narrative.

Maybe it lacks the dramatic tightness of the account by John of the first appearance of the risen Christ in the shuttered house in Jerusalem, of Thomas’ unbelief, and subsequent acclamation “My Lord and My God,” when Jesus appeared again in the same house a week later.

In today’s Gospel the place is different, the pace of the narrative has slowed, and, it seems to me, the purpose of Jesus’ meeting with this group of his followers is different, broader, it has more aspects to it:

To convince,

To convert,

and to commission.

For these seven disciples at the end of their night-fishing, on Lake Galilee, here was further evidence that Jesus, cruelly executed by crucifixion, was now risen and alive – and indeed present with them in rural Galilee as well as in Jerusalem.

This latest appearance on the seashore is a potent mixture of the commonplace and the mysterious. “Come and have breakfast”, what could be more natural than that?

But the whole set of circumstances make this a rather unique breakfast. As dawn breaks the fishing trip ends with nothing to show for the toil of the night. That all changes as the disciples heed the advice of the figure on the shore. “Cast the net to the right side of the boat.”

In the clear waters of Galilee someone on the shore might indeed see the movement of a shoal of fish that could not be picked up by those aboard the boat.

The catch is remarkable, abundant, overwhelming, reminiscent of another occasion when an abundance of food was provided to a crowd of 5,000 away in the hills who were hungry and had no means of providing for themselves.

At this seaside breakfast the immediate physical need of the disciples was met in a way that reinforced their conviction that Jesus was bodily alive, sharing a plain, pleasant meal with them.

Convincing them, strengthening their belief and their faith. ‘None of the disciples dared to ask him “who are you?” because they knew it was the Lord.’

Converting – in the strict sense of changing from one condition to another:

- converting a house from a derelict building to a beautiful home;
- converting water into steam;
- converting puzzled and fearful fishermen into Christian believers whose message of God in Christ would literally change the world.

Its interesting that we had the Conversion of Saul as the first reading today. The Damascus road experience – Hatred to Love. Darkness to Light. The classic dramatic Conversion.

The ongoing conversion of the disciples on the seashore continued a work of 3 years since they first had heard the call of the Nazarean carpenter “Follow me”.

Peter’s conversion towards the end of this passage takes him from grief and shame to forgiveness and restoration. Three times in the courtyard of the High Priest.

Peter had denied that he even knew Jesus.

Three times now Jesus questions his loyalty and his love, to the point where Peter is grieved.

The fact of this three-fold denial is being faced and it hurts. “Lord, you know everything – you know that I love you.” Its what Jesus specializes in, revealing the problem, dealing with the sin, saving the sinner – bringing new life and hope to us all when we feel unworthy and separated from God.

Convinced, Converted and finally Commissioned. Both Peter and Paul are left in no doubt that there is a job for them to do.

To Paul – “Get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.”

To Peter the insistent three-fold commission:

Feed my lambs,

Tend my sheep,

Feed my sheep.

Peter the fisherman, called to be chief shepherd of the infant church.

So there it is, the third resurrection appearance to the disciples. Bread and fish. An ordinary plain meal. But memorable and mysterious, convincing, illuminating, converting, changing, commissioning, encouraging and enabling the whole group as they face the next stage of their journey.

Our journey with the risen Lord is right here two thousand years on, with a General Election to think about, important issues to consider, votes to cast.

And we believe that God is with us just as much in seemingly smaller matters too – how we treat each other, how we show our love, in action day by day.

“Come and have breakfast.” The invitation to a meal naturally makes us think of the Eucharist, Holy Communion, that physical remembrance and sign of the Lord’s presence among us.

The inspiration we draw from this regular sharing with each other and with our risen Lord is the very same as that which reassured and then enlivened and empowered those first disciples. Like them, we accept the invitation to be fed, and then go joyfully to share his life and goodness with others, knowing that he is with us every step of the way.