

## SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION

Today's scripture reading is somewhat mysterious. We're told it's the 3<sup>rd</sup> time that the risen Christ has appeared to the disciples. The first time is in the Upper Room, where Jesus breathes Holy Spirit into the disciples and tells them they can choose to forgive, and that they have the power to do so.

The second time, Jesus invites Thomas to put his hands into Jesus wounds, and Jesus declares that people will believe even without this concrete evidence.

In today's reading, the disciples have been fishing all night, but have caught nothing. Jesus points them to where fish are to be found,- and the shift is no further than from one side of the boat to the other- he invites them to have breakfast with him, and sends Peter out to feed others.

There is a similar pattern in all three stories: Jesus appears unexpectedly, he gives to the disciples something that they need, and sends them out to give to others what is needed. Each time, Jesus points the way to new life- through forgiveness, through faith, through love.

let us listen for the Word of God, as it comes to us today, through John's gospel chapter 21: 1 – 19.

## SERMON

The movie, "Brothers", portrays the effect of war on a soldier in Afghanistan. It ends with words to this effect: "It has been said that only the dead LEAVE a war. The question is can the dead live again." And the question refers to the living dead- the product of war.

This particular soldier had experienced and been forced to commit such atrocities that he is no longer the same person- the person he was has died. It is true for many who come back from war.

But not only those who go to WAR- MANY people carry deep wounds from their childhood. The things done to them and then the things they have done now keep them from living and loving in the connected way that God intends.

Some of us have experienced this inner death through GRIEF –Losing a loved one, can BE like losing ourselves. We become a walking shell. It's winter at the north pole- there is no dawn. And we think for sure we know the answer to the question, "Can the dead live again?"

By the time the events in today's reading happen, the disciples have already SEEN and TOUCHED the risen Christ; the living Lord has come to them, twice, but they cannot, it seems, GRASP the life that is grasping them, calling them and sending them out.

They cannot, it seems, leave their grief, their shame, their sense of failure- every one of them gave in to FEAR, abandoned their beloved teacher in his hour of need. Peter, is the most devastated.

Peter, the ROCK on whom the church was to be FOUNDED, had been asked three times, "Aren't you a friend of the Nazarene?" Three times came his squeaky voiced reply "I don't know him". How do we LIVE with ourselves when we have failed those whom we love?

The disciples have lost their sense of worth, of usefulness and purpose. Their inner sense of futility is mirrored in their abortive fishing expedition. Then suddenly something NEW breaks in, - their emptiness turns into abundance!

It's a very strange story. It makes no logical sense that there would be masses of fish on one side of the boat and not some also on the other. Surely this story is NOT about fishing.....

From the very beginning Christians have used the image of a boat at sea to speak of the church. This is surely a story about the CHURCH.

Imagine we are in that boat (have you ever noticed that our sanctuary looks like an upside down boat- if we all reached up our arms we could be portaging!). we're in the boat.

According to this scripture there are TWO WAYS of going about our church work: we can fish off the left side of the boat, so to speak, which is to work in our own way, according to our own wisdom, without reference to Jesus, but this will not bear the fruit that God is looking for. Working in this way, the answer to the question, "Can the dead live again?" will always be "no".

OR, we can fish from the right hand side of the boat. The biblical meaning for "right hand" is "power" – Jesus sits at the "right hand of God", the hand that is most powerful. To fish off the right hand side of the boat is to fish, to work, in the power of God rather than in our own power, to work and live according to Jesus instructions rather than in our own way.

It is this that will bring abundance. It is through this "power fishing" that we can come up with the answer, "yes, the dead can live again".

To an outsider, the difference between these two ways of fishing may not be discernible. If someone were watching those fishermen, their actions would look pretty much the same- whether they fished from one side of the boat or the other. But the difference in results are staggering.

When they fish in their own way, their activity is futile; when they fish in Jesus way, there is abundant life! and that is our choice as a church: to work in our way or in Jesus way.

So how may we live and work in this other way, that is so powerful that it may bring to life even the dead? There are three clues in the scripture story: Firstly we need to listen for the voice of Jesus guiding us- we need to be a PRAYING church.

Secondly, we need to follow Jesus instructions, to ACT, to LIVE in Jesus way. Thirdly we need to receive from Christ what we need to go into the world, we're to receive Holy Spirit.

So, firstly, how may we listen for the voice of Jesus? We might note off the bat that Jesus is close enough for each of us to hear him. Jesus friends were not expecting or looking for Jesus, but they were within earshot, Jesus was not far away - they could hear him – and so can we..

When we think of a praying church, we likely think of bringing to God our needs and the world's needs- and that is certainly a very important part of prayer: to invite God's action, to be open ourselves for God's action to happen in and through us.

But another part of prayer is to LISTEN – to listen for what God may need of us, to listen for where God may be inviting US to act. This is not such a familiar kind of prayer to us, but is familiar to many Christians.

During my sabbatical, I spent three weeks at Pendle Hill, a Quaker community in Pennsylvania. We worshipped every morning - in Quaker style- sitting in silence and listening for a divine word.

Quakers have been doing this for 300 years. Even their business meetings are sometimes conducted largely in silence, listening for a divine nudge. There isn't an exact science to it, but Quakers have gathered together in their literature a good deal of knowledge and wisdom on the matter.

The fruits of this practice speak for themselves: Quakers are well known for their strong stands on issues of freedom and peace, and their good works amongst prisoners, the sick, the downtrodden.

In a week's time, some people here at Runnymede will be embarking on a Week of Guided Prayer, where the participants will learn and practice a very ancient method of listening for God's guidance, by praying scripture. (there is still room for a few more participants- if you sense a divine nudge, speak to me!)

A praying church may look the same from the outside as any other church. Our ministries, our activities, will LOOK the same; the difference will be seen in healed lives, changed hearts, abundant faith that knows new life is possible, and bold action that reflects the will of God.

So firstly, we need to listen for Jesus voice, and secondly, we're to DO what Jesus tells us, to LIVE in the different way that he points us to. Scripture gives us a record of what this other way is like:

It's quite simple: There ARE no enemies, only neighbours. We're to act in love, to include, forgive, make peace, and trust God in all things. Basically, non-violent living. This is what will yield abundant life.

A friend and I were here in the sanctuary the other day. He was looking at the stained glass windows above the choir. He said, "It looks like some group is getting ready to go into battle". I pointed out that those literal images of armour are deceptive.

Those windows actually depict Paul's teaching to put on the whole armour of GOD; Paul is telling us NOT to put on a breastplate, a Helmet, a shield. COMPLETELY the opposite: He says we're to have NO protection but truth, righteousness, knowledge of salvation, faith. THAT is our protection.

My friend had noted how, foolishly, they were all going into battle barefoot! –and yes- We're not to walk with hobnailed boots trampling others, Paul says, but to put on our feet whatever will make for peace.

And our only weapon is to be the Word of God and prayer! My friend declared “Well, you wouldn’t get ME going into battle under those conditions”- No....not many of us would. And yet, some have chosen this way. Martin Luther King at the height of the civil rights struggle spoke these words:

To our most bitter opponents we say. “Throw us in jail, and we will still love you. bomb our houses and threaten our children and we will still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our communities at the midnight hour and beat us and leave us half dead, and we shall still love you. but be ye assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. one day, we shall win freedom, but not only for ourselves. We shall so appeal to your heart and conscience that we shall win you in the process, and our victory will be a double victory.”.

That IS Jesus way- the way that transforms lives, that draws even the enemy into walking the way of peace and love. Simple. Utterly difficult. And yielding life abundant beyond all imagining.

How have Christians ever managed to live in Jesus way? Paul says we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us. He says that God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.

And this is what Jesus is doing with Peter in today’s scripture, pouring God’s love into Peter, firstly love for himself –unless we have some self esteem, some sense of our own worth, we cannot give ourselves away in love. We think we have nothing to give.

Peter, after his failure on that fateful Friday, does not believe himself to be worthy. And Jesus does not cover over the wound in Peter, he doesn’t say forget it, you’re not so bad, I love you anyway....No- what he does is more in the nature of piercing a boil:

With grace and compassion, Jesus gives Peter a chance to confess. It hurts Peter, because he knows he has fallen short in love.

But every time we confess, every time we name our failure, there is an opportunity in us to turn away from that failure, every time we confess, there is an opportunity to embrace a better way, every time we confess, a window in our soul is opened up for God to pour in the power we need to live in a better way. Confession is TRULY good for our souls.

It’s hard for us to note this confession in the English translation. In English there is only ONE word for love, but Greek distinguishes between different forms of love. TWO are mentioned in today’s reading:

“Agape” is the love of GOD, the self giving love that pours itself out for another, the kind of love we see in Jesus. When Jesus asks, do you love me? he uses the word agape. He says “do you agape me?”

When Peter answers, HE uses the word, philia, which is less than agape; philia is brotherly love, the love of a friend, human love . Peter says, “Lord you know I philia you.” The back and forth between Jesus and Peter is almost like the two sides of the boat- the human way, philia, and the divine way, agape.

Three times Jesus asks, "do you agape me. Do you love me above all else?" And three times Peter confesses: you know that my love for you is philia- it's human love. I'm human and I've failed you.

.And with each confession, Jesus doesn't say I forgive you, rather he builds up Peter's self esteem, he says, I believe in you- He entrusts Peter with the most important mission- Peter is to take over from Jesus as shepherd, and to feed Jesus flock with what they need. He sends Peter out to feed others.

He sends him out to practice agape love, over and over until when he is older he will have a second chance to lay down his life for Jesus – scripture says he will be led where he doesn't want to go.

This is not a warning or a threat- it's a promise- he will have a second chance. The God we worship is a God of second chances. What we have failed to do in our own power, we will be ABLE to do in and through the power of God.

And we will get there through listening in all things for God's voice, nudging us to make the shift from one side of the boat to the other. To make the shift from blame to forgiveness; from doubt to faith; from fear to love.

And we can live this other way, we CAN "power fish". All things ARE possible with God. In the power of the Holy Spirit we CAN say "yes" to forgiveness; we CAN say "yes" to faith, we CAN say "yes" to self giving love. We can say "Yes" to the question – "yes, it IS possible for the dead to live again."

And to God be all the power, the honour and the glory, Amen.