Easter 3

**‘Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach’**

Close your eyes for a moment and think about standing on the edge of a large lake at dawn; listen to the water lapping at the shoreline, the sound of the moving pebbles and stones in action with the waves. See the colour of the sky reflected in the lake, and watch as the sun rises, appearing like a great fiery ball over the surrounding hills, the light changing spectacularly as it does so.

We are in fact standing by the side of Lake or Sea of Galilee. Because of water extraction, the level is now lower than it was in Jesus’ time but it is still a quiet place, particularly when tourists are absent.

The day dawns full of new beauty and possibility. That is part of what John is telling us in this story, notice how, he draws our attention to the dawn, in verse 4, as he points to the risen Jesus.

But why were the disciples fishing at all. Surely that was the occupation of their former lives, a time when Jesus hadn’t burst into their mundane existences as Galilean fisherman and turned them upside down. Very puzzling and It may have been a puzzle to them too.

They had been on a roller coaster of an experience for the past 3 years, following this unique man and now, suddenly, they didn’t know where they were. They had hung on his every word, permitted themselves to be perplexed and confused by his words, his actions. Then the gruesome death following the kangaroo court, his seeming lack of defending himself against the charges put to him which, must have seemed strange in itself because during his ministry when up against the temple authorities, he seemed to have the right answer to silence them but, at that trial? No, he remained passive, silent. Then the method of his dying, crucifixion, treated like a common thief, exchanged for a murderer and dying a excruciating death. What was that about?

But then, on the third day, the empty tomb, the appearance of the risen Christ to the women and in the evening to the disciples themselves in the room where they had shut themselves away, fearful of the Jewish authorities and his words started to come back to them, to start making sense.

I think in that situation ‘gone fishing’ sounds an excellent idea, time away from family, friends, difficult questions; it was, of course, Simon Peter’s idea, leaping to action, another of his hurried decisions – he seems an impetuous man, someone who wanted to do the right thing, but didn’t know exactly what that was, so fishing probably seemed a good idea at that moment; he felt he needed to get on with his life, pick up where he left off, work through those last three years, put it into context and move on. You must have experienced times when you just need to be doing something very familiar to take your mind off something too complex or big to get your head round? I call it distraction activity and for me usually involves a lot of baking or cleaning ferociously, anything to stop thinking.

But the fishing trip didn’t work out, they caught nothing! Their experience and knowledge of the waters was to no avail, nothing. As in the Luke account, they worked all night and took nothing. And, if you have no success at night, you are less likely to succeed in the daytime.

But, just as dawn was breaking, the sky and sea filling with colour when they would be stretching and shivering from cold and probably hungry as well as tired, - at that moment, he came again. Like Mary in the garden, they didn’t know it was him. But in a word of greeting, a word of command, the nets are filled. Like the two disciples in the house in Emmaus (Luke 24.31) they knew in a flash who he was.

It might have been easier for Peter if, as happened at Emmaus, Jesus had simply vanished. But he didn’t. He stayed on the shore and waited for them to come in. Peter, unable to resist, impulsive as ever, leapt out of the boat, leaving the others to bring the boat ashore.

The words of the Gospel can never do justice to the reality of the resurrection. The first Easter is, simply, more than tongues can tell. So if its puzzling as to why the disciples went fishing at all, its also a puzzle why John included it in his gospel. The account does seem something of an add on coming after John, in chapter 20, has stated the purpose of his account; it seems to have been added after he had finished the first and main draft of the book. The stories we are left with in the Gospels contain some vital clues as to what to expect of or hope for the future church. John seems to have this account partly to set the scene for the painful, tense dialogue between Peter and Jesus in verses 15-19 and the haunting question about the Beloved Disciple himself in verses 21-23. But the detail in the present section suggest that it has a purpose of its own too. The precise number of fish – 153, points to an abundance and tells us something important about the future of the Church. The Church will be as abundant as a fisherman’s haul and as diverse and full of interesting specimens. And John, in his recounting of the breakfast is saying something about hospitality: that Jesus still invites us to feast with him. Even though the disciples deserted Jesus after their last supper, there are other suppers. Jesus is, in every sense the Host. We continue to feed on him and feed with him.

Jesus, after all, has given his followers a strange and striking commission in chapter 20. They are to work for him. they are to be filled with God’s breath and be sent into the world as Jesus had been. But, if they try to do it on their own, they will fail. They will toil all night and take nothing. The only way is for them to admit defeat, to listen afresh to Jesus’ voice and do what he says. Then there is no way of knowing what they might achieve.

Water symbolizes the forces of chaos and overwhelming. One of the strange things about the Bible is that there is no real example of successful swimming before the resurrection. But after Easter, it is different. Peter can take the plunge The resurrection appearances invite the disciples to take risks. The church will be advanced by those who can learn to swim or even try and walk on water!

There is a venetian proverb – ‘the critic stands on the shore; but the artist swims in the sea’ In our resurrection faith, we are invited to take the plunge, not because we are rash, but because Christ now beckons us to join him in a new life of adventure and hope.

So stand in your own mind’s eye with the disciples in that boat. What projects have you been labouring over and getting nowhere? Watch for the dawn. Watch for the figure on the shore. Listen for his voice and then do whatever he tells you.

Amen