
Making a Meal of It

John 21: 1-21

A Sermon preached at All Saints, Kings Heath on September 5, 2018 by Revd Dr Sam Wells

Why does God make it so difficult? That's the question with which Thomas Aquinas starts his magisterial *Summa Theologiae*. Why doesn't God make it all clear to reason rather than resorting to revelation? Thomas says, if God relied on our reason, only the clever would get it, it would be hard work, and there would be lots of mistakes. Jerome, the fourth-century translator of the Bible into Latin, said God's self-revelation is 'a pool deep enough for scholars to swim in without ever touching the bottom and yet shallow enough for children to paddle in without ever drowning.' And the seventeenth century French polymath Blaise Pascal said, 'In faith there is enough light for those who want to see and enough shadow to blind those who don't.'

We're here to celebrate the ministry of a man through whom God has shone much light on those who want to see, and yet whose gift is to walk in the shadows with those who can't or won't or don't, thank you very much. The account of the disciples' fishing expedition in John chapter 21 is a story of how revelation works, in discipleship, ministry and mission.

Like our beloved David, the disciples say to themselves, the resurrection is all very well, but surely it's time for food. They go fishing. There's a sadness about this trip; they're not with Jesus, as on many boat trips before; and there's not many disciples left – only seven in fact. Bit of a survivors' photo. But seven is always an important number in the Bible. Seven is going to be enough. David can make a meal with seven ingredients. So can Jesus. And the named disciples – Peter, Thomas and Nathanael – are precisely the three who have previous experience of having doubt transformed by Jesus: Peter denied, Thomas wanted physical proof, Nathanael thought nothing good could come out of Galilee. Touchingly all the disciples with one accord say to Peter, 'We're going with you.' The church has always had a cult of charismatic leaders. But look here: Peter's a charismatic leader who leads his people to failure. Nothing. In John 15 Jesus says, 'Without me you can do nothing.' And lo and behold, nothing is precisely what the disciples, under Peter's visionary leadership, achieve all night. Night tends to be a bad time in John. But failure becomes the moment of revelation. Remember that: failure isn't a sign that you're pathetic or that God hasn't blessed you. Failure is the moment of revelation: the moment you live God's dream, not your own.

It's fair to say the disciples are not the sharpest knives in the carving set. Jesus is on the shore, but they don't recognise him. Now the church tends to regard Jesus as either the perpetual judge or the source of utter affirmation. Bit like David: his own worst critic, but a source of limitless kindness to everyone else. But here Jesus is neither. He doesn't say 'You shouldn't be fishing'; nor does he say, 'On you go.' He says, 'Make one change: cast your net on the other side.' When you're cooking a meal and it's going wrong, you don't want David to say, 'You're completely useless' – but neither do you want him to say, 'Oh no, really, I like eggs that have been scraped off the floor a couple of times before they reached the pan, and I'm sure the others all do too. It's actually all the rage – all the best French chefs do it. No, really.' You want him to say, 'Just a suggestion – switch off the gas for a minute while you add the flour. It works. No idea why – but it does.' Well now it works big time. Way too many fish: 153 – maybe telling the early church that if Israel wasn't nibbling, try the nations. You're not useless; but it's obviously not working. No need for a new boat or new nets or new disciples. Make one change. Just a suggestion. That one change could change everything. It could be a revelation.

Now the Beloved Disciple says, 'It is the Lord!' Notice how we're not told whether the Beloved Disciple recognised Jesus on the shore or realised that the miracle could only have one cause. We constantly say, 'If I could just see Jesus, I'd get it.' Or, 'If I could just have a sign, I'd follow.' But look – in this story Peter does see Jesus, and he does experience a miraculous sign – but he *still* doesn't get it. It's just like Easter morning. Peter enters the empty tomb, rummages among the grave clothes like David looking for his glasses in the morning, and yet is bewildered. The Beloved

Disciple gets it. All the light for those who want to see, but enough shadow for those who don't or can't or won't.

Then Peter wraps a cloak around himself and dives into the sea. There's two things going on here. A naked man in the water obviously refers to baptism, and takes us back to John chapter 1. But wrapping a towel around yourself takes us back to footwashing in John chapter 13. Footwashing and baptism are the two ways disciples in John are prepared for service. In different ways they're forms of death: baptism once and for all, footwashing regularly. Here they combine.

By now it's dawning on us that John chapter 21 is like a highlights package of the whole gospel. Just think – fish, sea, miracle, recognising Jesus: if you're paying attention you realise we're back in John chapter 6, where all these things appear, and once Jesus turns out to have some bread ready for breakfast, we've got the full set, and we're clearly back in feeding of the five thousand territory – another occasion when there was way more food than was needed. We're back to the place we started and we're recognising it for the first time. That's revelation: when you come back to something or someone or somewhere and this time realise what, who or where they really are.

I know a man who gets all the food ready and then tantalises you by giving you a starter that just whets your appetite for the meal. But you don't eat at the table. It's usually already past usual dinnertime and you're salivating but he's telling you something that he's spent the whole preparation time thinking about, and rewarding you for waiting. The disciples' breakfast is like that. That starter is the charcoal fire. Take yourself back to chapter 18, where Peter warms himself by a charcoal fire before betraying Jesus three times. Imagine what Peter's thinking. He must get an almost allergic reaction to seeing a charcoal fire again. He's just had his biggest ever success as a fisherman and Jesus is straightaway taking him back to his place of failure. Each of us have a charcoal fire: something whose texture, smell and sound instantly remind us of something horrendous, something miserable, something that makes us nervous and guilty and distraught. Jesus knows what that thing is for Peter, but Jesus turns that thing into good, a source of food and warmth for God's people. That's what our greatest sins are for: they're waiting to be turned into instruments of God's blessing. That's why we love David: it's actually not about the food; it's because he's able to countenance the worst in us; and he's patient enough to wait for the blessing.

Then Jesus takes the bread and gives it. I don't think I need to help you with that one. It's the penny-drop moment: it makes us realise that the whole of this scene has been a Eucharist. We gather together – seven, 70, or 700. We face our failure, whether our efforts were malign or just pathetic. We hear Jesus' words, which turn our scarcity into God's abundance. We respond in faith. We share food. And look at the next words – they're about Jesus' appearance to the disciples. We look across to Luke's gospel, and its account of Jesus' appearance to the disciples at Emmaus, and we could simply lift in Luke's words – 'and he was made known to them in the breaking of the bread.' Revelation in failure: confession. Revelation in Jesus' words: readings and sermon. Revelation in baptism. Revelation in forgiveness: the peace. Revelation in the breaking of the bread: communion. Look in verse 10: there's even an offertory procession when the disciples bring Jesus some of the fish they've caught. There's probably notices and coffee if you look hard enough.

But we're not done yet. Jesus isn't done yet. The meal isn't the end of the Eucharist. There's some commissioning to do after breakfast. Just as we've discovered what mission, meeting God in the world, is about, through failure and God's activity beyond our comprehension, so we're about to find out what ministry, meeting God in one another, is about. This is one of the most poignant, truthful and human scenes in the gospels. Peter denied Jesus three times at a charcoal fire. Here he gets three chances to put things right. The key to the conversation is the difference between *philein*, to cherish, and *agapein*, to lay down one's life. Different kinds of love. Peter seems not to grasp the difference.

Jesus says, 'Peter, will you lay down your life for me?' Peter replies, 'You know that I cherish you.' Jesus says, 'Peter, will you lay down your life for me?' Peter says, 'You know that I cherish you.' Jesus says, 'Peter, do you cherish me?' Peter is exasperated that Jesus needs to ask a third time and reacts as if Jesus has mistrusted him. How could Jesus ever do that? Has Peter ever let him down? ... Then Peter replies, 'You know that I cherish you.' The irony is overwhelming. Peter thinks he's given the right answer, and is hurt that Jesus needs to ask. He's said he cherishes Jesus,

which proved insufficient at the first charcoal fire, but what he hasn't said is that he'll lay down his life for Jesus, which is precisely what he didn't do first time round. And agonisingly he doesn't even realise what he hasn't said. The fact that he can't find the right word shows he hasn't learned his lesson. Why get so exercised over one little word? Sometimes one word is the wafer that contains the universe – or the mouthful that poisons the whole meal.

Can we ever trust and rely on a person again when they've not only let us down but haven't even learned their lesson? We flock to David because he doesn't rush to answer such questions, but sits with us in the silence of not knowing. Turns out Jesus does. He does love, even though he knows. He works with what Peter's giving him, not what he'd like Peter to be giving him. He gives Peter his marching orders. 'Tend and feed my flock.' Remember Jesus isn't just the good shepherd. He's the lamb of God. Whenever a priest like David is called to a flock, that priest is not just called to imitate the shepherd – but to realise that one of the sheep will turn out to be Jesus. That's the fun of ministry: finding out which one. And then the final twist. Peter, who can't find the words to say, 'I'll lay down my life for you,' learns that he's going to lay his life down anyway, even if he tries to wriggle out a second time. Sometimes your finest moments in discipleship come when you don't realise what you're doing.

So here's discipleship. Discipleship isn't devoted following of Jesus: it's making pitiful misunderstandings and offering painfully inadequate responses and finding Jesus uses us anyway. And here's ministry. Ministry is discovering you're a flawed half-reconciled failure but, rather than indulgently pondering your inadequacy, getting on with offering food and oversight since that's what Jesus has called you to do, and dwelling in the shadows of half-reconciliation and tentative discipleship; and somehow making a meal of it. And here's mission. Mission is working all night because you know you're God's gift to fishing and having nothing to show for it and then having the faint streak of humility to take one piece of advice and finding the superabundance of God's glory all falling in your lap when you'd done nothing to achieve it.

And at this point we realise that this fishing story isn't just the shape of the Eucharist – it's the shape of the whole gospel. Jesus is with us. We try to survive on our own strength. We fail. Jesus appears to us. We don't recognise him. Jesus speaks to us. His words give abundant life. Jesus shares food with us. Jesus calls us to reconciliation. We half get it. Jesus points a way through suffering to glory. We fancy a different way. But in the end he says, 'You're coming with me.'

This is John 21. You can skip the other chapters. The whole gospel, baptism and Eucharist, discipleship, ministry and mission, word and sacrament: it's all here. Swim in it without ever touching the bottom. Paddle in it without ever drowning. It's the dawn of faith. There's enough light for you to see. Just enough.