

Sermon on John 21:1 – 23

Restoration and a New Beginning

You have probably noticed that John likes to give his sermons a title, and he puts a title for every sermon on the rota. Well, I have called this one Restoration and a New Beginning. It is a familiar story and one which some of you will have reflected on more than once. So much has been written about this last chapter of John's Gospel and I am grateful to the theologians Ian Paul, Tom Wright and Bruce Milne for their insights.

I am someone who likes a tidy ending. When I watch a film or read a book, I like everything to be resolved. I like the feeling of completion. Others I know are quite happy for there to be no real resolution – to be left to figure out for themselves what might have happened next, to be left with endless possibilities. I think there is a sense in which this final chapter of John's gives us both.

We find the disciples back in Galilee, back by the Sea of Tiberias, probably back at the place it all began. Peter must have been on home ground because when he decides to go fishing, he obviously has access to a boat. Peter doesn't know what to do with himself, so he does what he knows, he goes fishing and his companions go with him. They fish all night and catch nothing, as dawn approaches, they are coming back, and they see a figure on the shore – he tells them to throw the net over the right side of the boat and lo and behold it fills with fish – more than the net would usually be able to hold without tearing, 153 no less. There is lots of debate about this specific number and I am sure that it is a detail that is included for a purpose, but I am not going into the significance of numerology this morning. Peter immediately recognises the figure on the shore – "it is the Lord" he cries and jumps right in, desperate to be with Jesus and leaving the others to cope with the catch. Hardly surprising that Peter recognised Jesus at that point, you may recall the day that Jesus first

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called Peter. That had been another fruitless night of fishing and another time when they did what Jesus told them and found their nets full to overflowing. On that day three years earlier, Peter had fallen to his knees and begged Jesus to go away from him because he was a sinful man and Jesus simply replied, follow me and I will make you a fisher of men.

So, Jesus is on the beach, and He has already prepared breakfast – there is bread and fish already cooking. But He tells the disciples to bring some of their catch along as well. And here Tom Wright observed something that never occurred to me before. Jesus didn't need the fish they caught; He already had all that was needed but He welcomed what they brought. We often hear the expression, "Jesus has no hands and feet but ours", I have said it myself many times. But this infers that Jesus can do nothing without us, without our efforts, our hands and feet. And of course, this is not true, Jesus is the author and perfecter of all things, He has every resource that He needs. He chooses to include us in His plans, He wants us to work with Him, alongside Him, to do His work but He remains sovereign! Thankfully it is not all down to us, on our own we would fish all night and catch nothing. It is only when we look to Jesus, hear and obey His voice that we are successful and fruitful.

So they ate breakfast together and then Jesus takes Peter aside for a chat. We can imagine the mixture of emotions that Peter must be feeling. Along with the joy of being with the risen Jesus, he must have still been so very painfully aware of how badly he had let Jesus down on the night of His arrest. His own boastful words about how he would follow Jesus anywhere - even to death. Jesus reply that before the cock crowed Peter would deny Him three times. The shame of the memory of doing exactly that – his cowardice and betrayal.

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Three times. Three times Peter denied Jesus and three times Jesus asks Peter if he loves Him. Peter is offered exactly the restoration that he needs. He is offered a rewrite, another chance, different words to ring in his ears. He is offered the chance to tell Jesus again how much he truly loves Him and without Jesus even saying it Peter receives forgiveness and is restored. More than that, he is recommissioned, given a new role – to feed Jesus lambs, to take care of His sheep. And then Jesus goes on to tell Peter something about the way in which he would die. Finally, He says to Peter, just as He said to him right at the beginning, “Follow me”. So all the loose ends are tied up, everything is put right, Peter has come full circle but can now go forward with a new understanding and a new purpose.

But Peter is human, and he looks behind and sees John following them. He just can't resist, “Lord, what about him?”. And Jesus puts Peter straight, whatever was going to happen to John was between Jesus and John. “What is that to you?” He said, “you must follow me!”.

Now I said at the beginning that this passage brings us both resolution, completion and an open ending. Peter is restored, this part of his journey with Jesus is resolved. He had been restored and forgiven and set on a new path, given a new beginning. The open ending is our part in the story. Because we all get this chance with Jesus, usually more than once, because like Peter we mess up more than once. Jesus is as patient and loving and compassionate with us as He was with Peter. He knows that we need to be able to say sorry, He knows how we need to say sorry. He provides the opportunity for us to recommit ourselves to Him, to tell Him we love Him, and He will always forgive us, restore us and set us on a new path. He will always give us new ways to work with Him and for Him, and as long as we rely on Him and not on

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ourselves, we will be fruitful in whatever He calls us to do. The story is open ended because I don't even know all that He has in store for me yet, let alone what He has in store for you. I do know that for now He has called us to work together. Not to compare ourselves with each other, think ourselves somehow better or worse than one another, but to support one another, to encourage one another and to bless one another in every way that we can.