By the Lakeside.

John 21.

Holy Communion.

Emmanuel Youtube.

Sunday May 10th 2020

John 21.

1. *Afterward Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Galilee. It happened this way:*
2. *Simon Peter, Thomas (also known as Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together.*
3. *“I’m going out to fish,” Simon Peter told them, and they said, “We’ll go with you.” So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.*
4. *Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus.*
5. *He called out to them, “Friends, haven’t you any fish?” “No,” they answered.*
6. *He said, “Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some.” When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish.*
7. *Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, “It is the Lord,” he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water.*
8. *The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a hundred yards.*
9. *When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread.*
10. *Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish you have just caught.”*
11. *So Simon Peter climbed back into the boat and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, 153, but even with so many the net was not torn.*
12. *Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” None of the disciples dared ask him, “Who are you?” They knew it was the Lord.*
13. *Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish.*
14. *This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead.*
15. *When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” “Yes, Lord,” he said, “you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Feed my lambs.”*
16. *Again Jesus said, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” He answered, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Take care of my sheep.”*
17. *The third time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, “Do you love me?” He said, “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Feed my sheep.*
18. *Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.”*
19. *Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, “Follow me!”*
20. *Peter turned and saw that the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them. (This was the one who had leaned back against Jesus at the supper and had said, “Lord, who is going to betray you?”)*
21. *When Peter saw him, he asked, “Lord, what about him?”*
22. *Jesus answered, “If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me.”*
23. *Because of this, the rumour spread among the believers that this disciple would not die. But Jesus did not say that he would not die; he only said, “If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?”*
24. *This is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down. We know that his testimony is true.*
25. *Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written.*

I don’t know whether you’ve noticed, but one positive thing about the present weird time we’re in these days is that more people will ask, “How are you?”, but more importantly, when they ask it, it’s not just a polite formula; they really do want to know. So how are you? Now of course, over Youtube I know you can’t answer me, but you can pause a moment to consider it. How are you? In asking that, I’m not just asking about whether you’ve kept free of the virus so far, important as that is, neither am I asking if you’re managing with the shopping and other practical things of life, important as they are too. What I’m asking is how you are really? What does it feel like inside? I’m very aware that my emotions are all over the place at the moment. I’m mostly absolutely fine, laughing and joking with the family and friends here at home or on line or telephone; but then very suddenly, and for no obvious reason I’m plunged to the depths! It doesn’t last long, though, and I come up again just as suddenly.

I’m not really worried about all this because I recognise that it’s a symptom of the times we’re living in. It’s all unfamiliar. We’re not used to living our lives in this restricted way. We want to be out and about and able to be close with others. It must be even worse for those of you living alone. We need some ‘hug therapy’, I think.

One blessing is that I think the feelings I have help me to understand a little of what those disciples must have been going through in what we have just read this morning. They had been through an absolute roller-coaster of emotion for weeks! Jesus had been with them, they had a great celebration meal, but he was immediately taken from them and brutally tortured and killed; then he was back, but he was coming and going and they never knew when to expect to see him – or whether they would see him again. I don’t read in any of the gospel accounts that Jesus ever said to the disciples, “See you again next week!” The nearest we come to that is the angel’s instruction to the women on Easter morning (Matthew 28:7) to tell the disciples to go to Galilee to see him there. So the disciples were also facing a completely uncertain future – much as we are now. Would Jesus go on appearing and disappearing like this? ‘Normal’ would never again be the kind of ‘normal’ they had known in the past, and I suspect that will be true for us when all this is over too.

The question is often asked, why did Peter decide to go fishing that night? Was it, as some have suggested, that he had lost faith and decided to cut his losses and go back to his original occupation now that this apparent ‘new life’ was over? I don’t think so. I believe it had much more to do with what we’ve been looking at here. I believe that Peter, and the others who went with him, just needed something familiar to hang on to. They needed something ordinary to reassure them that it wasn’t the end of everything. It was a moment like when I feel down. I long for more familiar times too. I long to meet with you guys in Church again. I long for something as simple as being able to go to a garden centre again.

Last Autumn Jo and I had a wonderful holiday of a lifetime. Part of it was a week’s cruise in Alaska. It was great, with many new and exciting experiences, and we were treated with wonderful food and, really opulent living. At the end we had to fly to Toronto and we arrived quite late in the evening, needing to find some food. Just along the road from our hotel we found a little late-night café, just what we needed, so in we went. I was able to order shepherd’s pie, and do you know what, that was just **SO** good. After all the rich and special food we had enjoyed for a week or more, I was craving something ordinary. Now, some eight months or so later, I remember that meal much more clearly than most of the other, much more rich, or ‘special’ ones. Was that my equivalent to those disciples wanting to go fishing that night?

Let’s go back to the passage, because the roller-coaster continued that morning, especially for Peter. If, as I suggest, the return to fishing was a kind of comfort blanket for Peter and his friends, the comfort didn’t last long, because it ended with the frustration of a weary night’s work with nothing to show for it. Then along comes this stranger (not yet recognised as Jesus) and tries to tell them how to do their job! It would not have been surprising if the exhausted fishermen had told the man on the beach where to put his advice! But no, all credit to them, they took it and landed a huge catch. And it was in that act of obedience that they recognised who the man on the shore was. Now there’s a lesson for us. Did you hear that? It was in that act of obedience that they recognised who the man on the shore was. That’s so often true for us too in our Christian lives. It is as we obey, often not understanding, that we recognise God at work in our lives too.

Now John goes to great lengths to tell us that the catch was 153 fish. Over the centuries, theologians have argued to try to explain the significance of 153, but without conclusive success. I don’t claim to have the answer either, except to say that by becoming embroiled in that we’re in danger of missing the point. The point surely is that this was an extremely generous catch. They were going to have breakfast together. We’re told there were seven of them present, plus Jesus. If they had eaten two fish each, that only accounts for 16, or if they were extra hungry after their night’s work, surely a maximum of three each – that’s 24! So why 153? My point is about Jesus being consistent. This is the last of Jesus’ recorded miracles and it’s all about generosity. Now remember his first one? That was the wedding at Cana three years earlier. How much water did he turn into great quality wine? Yes, somewhere between 120 and 180 gallons of the stuff, and not at the beginning of the festivities! The guests were already ‘well-oiled’, should we say? That was ridiculously generous. The same was true when Jesus fed 5,000 (plus women and children), and again, 4000. Both times, there were plenty of leftovers! The point is that this is the same Jesus. Yes, in some ways he’s different now – he has a resurrection body that can appear and disappear, move through walls, and so on. Nevertheless, he’s still the same Jesus, still the same love, still the same generosity, still the same Saviour and Lord.

So then comes breakfast and no doubt it was a lovely time, leaving precious memories with the disciples for the rest of their lives. The roller-coaster had gone right up again, but then for Peter at least it came crashing down once more in that awkward, embarrassing conversation with Jesus near the end of the passage. Clearly, Peter was irritated by Jesus’ repeated question about loving him. You may have heard me say before that I’m currently reading Paula Gooder’s book on the Resurrection. She asks the question, ‘when does gentle reminder turn into intolerable nagging?’ and she suggests that the answer is different for all of us depending upon our tolerance levels. However, Jesus’ three-fold question was not really nagging, but entirely necessary to confront Peter with his previous three-fold denial at Jesus’ trial, and so to reinstate him. So actually, Jesus was only bringing Peter’s roller-coaster crashing down there in order to raise him up again, but to raise him to a more secure place with a damaged relationship renewed and restored, and a new commission, “feed my sheep”.

That’s true for us too. When we are forgiven by God and our friendship with him is restored, it’s not just to make us feel warm and cosy inside. Yes, it certainly does that, but that’s only a by-product. The main reason for restoring us too, like Peter, however many times it may happen in our lives, is in order to commission, or sometimes recommission us for the work we are called to do for him.

Well, there have been a number of lessons for us along the way this morning, and I’m sorry this has been a bit long, but it was a long passage with lots in it. The main lesson to take away is, surely, that just as God used the disciples’ roller-coaster experiences then, so he can use ours now, if we will let him. So as we travel through this very abnormal time, ‘corona time’, with a very uncertain future when probably ‘normal’ will never again be quite what we remember it to be, let’s make sure we permit God to use this experience to mould us and grow us; to fit us better for the work he has for us in that uncertain future.