

Sunday 1st May 2022, 3rd Sunday of Easter: John 21:1-19 'Feed'

One fine summer morning in 2006 I was walking across Blackfriars Bridge to my office, as I did every day Monday to Friday. I was in my mid-30s and approaching ten years' employment with the company. I had sat at the same desk for most of those ten years, a lovely window seat looking out over St Paul's, Tate Modern and the Thames between them.

Alise and I had been married for 7 years, we had two lovely children and we'd recently returned from a brilliant holiday on the Isle of Wight. We'd bought a house in South London the year before and were part of a great church. Among other things I led a ministry which involved pastoral responsibility for about 50 people, and which was going really well.

On the surface everything was rosy... and yet there was also something else going on inside me. I was starting to struggle in my job, truth be told I was a bit bored for most of my working day and although almost everything else was great – lovely family, lovely home, great colleagues, great church – there was a sense of unease, disquiet.

And on that bridge on that sunny summer's morning, **the Lord suddenly spoke a simple word to me: 'Feed my sheep.'** Just like that. I wasn't expecting it, I may have been turning over the day ahead and wondering what it would hold: part praying, part ruminating as you often do. But I wasn't away on retreat, or sat in church or doing anything special. It was a normal commute on a normal day – and it changed my life. 'Feed my sheep.'

Almost 16 years later, I'm sat here recording this service partly because of that summer morning commute, and what the Lord spoke. I'm basically doing what I was told! Of course, there are so many other things contributing to why I'm here now, so this passage is only a part of the journey: nevertheless it *is* an important part. Those simple words Jesus spoke to Peter all those years ago have a special place in my heart, too. Jesus is still calling people to feed his sheep. I wonder if he's calling any of you?

It's a famous story we look at today, and much loved. I think partly we love its location: most of us love Jesus, most of us love beaches and most of us love barbecues – so a story about meeting Jesus on a beach with a barbecue basically ticks all the boxes. We also love the way that Peter is restored: after denying Jesus three times, Jesus restores him three times: 'Simon son of John, do you love me... do you love me... do you love me?' Geeks like me also love the fact that John records the precise number of fish: 153 (with apologies that I shortened the passage slightly so you didn't hear that snippet earlier).... and that despite this huge number Jesus already had fish cooking on the fire.

But today I'm going to focus on one particular thing. It's such a striking story that sometimes we miss the fact that **the two halves of the story are connected in a very direct way: they're both about feeding.** And whilst the barbecue might be a good preamble to what Jesus says to Peter, I think it goes deeper than that. Peter is meant to feed the flock in the same way that Jesus has just fed all of them. Not literally with a barbecue meal, though I reckon most churches would have significantly more people in them if they did offer a free barbecue every week!

What we learn from the first half of the story is that **at the heart of feeding the flock is the person and presence of Jesus himself**. The disciples' catch of fish was a great miracle, but in fact it was incidental: the fish were already there, Jesus had *already* provided them to feed his flock.

At the heart of any healthy church is Jesus himself. Not a great structure or an inspiring vision or a talented team of people, though these are all useful. Not a good website or central location or even a beautiful building, though these can be a blessing too. What feeds us is the presence of Jesus. The better we know him, the more we love him. The more we love him, the more we long to spend time with him – and the more that love overflows out to others.

Feed others, Jesus says to Peter, like I fed you. Lead them into my presence, help them to enjoy spending time with me, and experience more of my love – and I'll do the rest. And that's the other notable thing about this story: in feeding the flock, **it's Jesus who does all the heavy lifting**. It's Jesus who orchestrated the huge catch, it's Jesus who cooked the breakfast. Ministry is not about how hard we work but about how close we are to the Lord, as a wise old leader once told me. If we're sticking close to Jesus, he'll make our lives both faithful and fruitful.

So, as I draw to a close, this is not just a passage for would-be leaders – though maybe God will be nudging some of you today. He keeps calling, just as he did with Peter, and just he did with me. Instead, today, **it's an invitation at a more general level to be fed by Jesus**: to spend time in his presence, to let him give you all that need for each day. As Jesus met the disciples where they were, so Jesus still meets us where we are. In fact, Jesus came to their workplace – so perhaps for some of you there's a particular nudge to find Jesus meeting you in your workplace: your work matters as much to him as your church life, perhaps even more so. That was true for me in my old employment – might it be true in yours?

But wherever you are, Jesus comes to meet you there. All we have to do is invite him in. 'Behold I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the doors, I will come in and eat with them, and they with me.' Amen.