Easter 3 – sermon on 5 May 2025

John 21: 1-14

……in the 20th chapter of John`s Gospel, we have a stirring climax. Having convinced the disciples that he had risen from the dead, it appears that Jesus is about to ride off into the sunset. John writes a concluding paragraph. “In his disciples presence Jesus performed many other miracles which are not written down in this book. But these are written in order that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God and that through your faith in him, you may have life.” After that chapter, the next chapter – 21 - is like the extra time played in a football match. It is part of the big match, it is exciting, even gripping, but it is definitely played after the final whistle.

What then is the purpose of John`s additional chapter?

Williams Temple that great Archbishop of Canterbury speaks in the middle of the 20th century of the need for this chapter to point the way forward for the church. The rest of the gospel has spoken of the activity of Jesus on earth. The big question then, and now, is how is Christ to be followed today. That is the question that John begins to answer.

He begins by focusing our attention on the situation of the disciples. In spite of the events they have experienced, their lives have not been changed. They have returned to Galilee. The only change from the old days before they heard John the Baptist cry “Behold the lamb of God” is that they have gained some new friends. Here are Peter and the sons of Zebedee and possibly Andrew. But now there are also Thomas and Nathaniel. This group has nothing in particular to do. So, they are quite willing to follow Simon Peter, when he says, “Let’s go fishing”. Their old link with Christ is severed, they are drifting, all they have left is the fellowship of those whose experience they have shared and the activities they indulged in.

These characteristics are frequently repeated in the life of the church. There are those to whom God has appeared. There are many who know that Christ is risen. There are multitudes who enjoy the fellowship of the church. But have they been changed? Is it possible to detect in your life, anything other than church activity?

In my considered judgement, the gospel is fundamentally concerned with change. Above all it is a change in our relationship with God, which brings in the way in which we live. When the disciples acted on the suggestions of Jesus, there was an immediate change in their fortunes. After a night’s toil, their labour had proved futile. By being open to the voice of Jesus, all was changed. But even then, the disciples were not aware that it was Jesus who had directed them. But as John toiled at the net, his mind raced back to another occasion, when Jesus had transformed their fishing and crowned it with success. As he peers through the grey morning light, the beloved disciple recognises Jesus. We can almost hear him catch his breath as he whispers to the disciples, “It is the Lord!”

How natural that it would be this sensitive and brooding disciple, who saw Jesus in this activity. Only a short time earlier it had been he, who on seeing the folded grave clothes, knew that Jesus had been risen. Yet why him and not the others? We are not given an answer, but I think that answer lies in his relationship with Jesus. He had been close to Jesus.

In three years, John had been the most responsive of the disciple, no wonder he recognised Jesus first. The relationship let him to open his eves, so that he could see.

It is only as we have a vibrant and vital relationship with Jesus that we shall be able to discern the voice of Christ and to change in a way which is well pleasing to him. Then, it will only be in retrospect that we shall possess any degree of certainty that we have acted aright. It was the straining net that told John of Jesus. What I am trying to say is put some much more eloquently by William Cowper:

> Blind unbelief is sure to err and scan his work in vain.
> God is his own interpreter and he will make it plain.

God does make plain his path to us as we are in a daily relationship of obedience to him. When Peter realises that it is Jesus on the sea shore, he impatiently jumps overboard. He can`t wait to be in the presence of Jesus. As for the others, they got the boat ashore as soon as they could, leaving the net full of fish still in the water. Everything came second to be with Jesus, even a great and expensive haul of fish.

These priorities were to be repeated, time after time in the history of the early church. Jesus came first, other priorities came in second place. That will inevitably bring change to us. A great friend of mine, The Reverend Gary Cockerill, has followed Christ for many years by serving him in Sierra Leone. This was not simply a one-man band. His whole family were with him. It was a difficult and demanding task of building up the church there. Later he came back to Clinton, Mississippi where he became a professor training the next generation of pastors.

Christ also has a calling for each of us. For some people they are given a task that they are called to pursue for most of or sometimes all their lives. But we can have an impact on people with something we do for our neighbour and listening to a colleague at work. We might not know at this moment what God has in store for us.

The disciples were taken completely by surprise. It could be that we are also given a surprise by God. That means changes that God has for us. To know God`s will, we must be listening to his word. Be ready to hear. Be eager like John to discern it, be enthusiastic like Peter and jump overboard at the opportunity of being in the presence of Christ. But all these things can happen, if our relationship to Jesus is real and not merely a hollow pretence of church involvement. So may we grow in knowledge and understanding, conscious of the needs of others and determined to change a world in need.