

### 3<sup>rd</sup> of Easter C Acts 9.1-20 John 21.1-19

Our readings today are all about second chances. From the Book of Acts we have the story of Saul and his conversion on the road to Damascus. To most observers Saul would seem to be the last person capable of becoming a great apostle to the Gentiles. And I expect Saul would have agreed with them. He was a persecutor of the Church. Hated and feared by those who belonged to the Way. Even by saintly Ananias who thought that God must have somehow made a mistake. But God saw something in Saul that no one else could see. He turned Saul's life upside down and gave him a second chance. A new beginning. A new purpose. And a new name.

And then there's the story of Peter. Today's Gospel takes place after the resurrection. Peter was still coming to terms with what had happened. He decided to go back to what he knew. To fishing. Last week the risen Jesus breathed on the disciples and sent them to proclaim forgiveness of sins. But how could Peter forgive others when he couldn't forgive himself? The memory of that Good Friday morning when he had denied Jesus three times still weighed heavy on him. Perhaps he needed time to think. So he went back to his old job. To what he was doing when Jesus first called him. But even there things weren't right. He couldn't just reverse the clock and return to his former life. He caught nothing and was ready to give up. But Jesus came to him and the other disciples and told them to try again. To have another go. John recognised Jesus immediately. And Peter hurried to put some clothes on. Rather like a guilty Adam in the garden of Eden.

This time the disciples caught loads of fish. 153 to be very precise. There are all sorts of theories about that number. Many commentators think that it is significant that Jesus told them to fish on the other side of the boat. Perhaps this points to the church's mission to the Gentiles. On this occasion, the net did not break and all of the fish were brought ashore. This event was another reminder to the disciples, and to us, that we can do nothing in our own strength but only through obedience to Christ. A reminder too that all things come from God. When the disciples reached the shore Jesus had already lit a fire. It probably reminded Peter of the fire in the courtyard of the high priest where he had denied Jesus. Jesus told him and the other disciples to bring some fish but he already had some cooking. Though he didn't need their help he sought their collaboration, as he seeks our collaboration. And he offered the disciples hospitality as he did at their last supper together, breaking the bread and distributing the fish. Hospitality is often at the heart of the Gospel and mission.

It's a long Gospel but it's important that we hear all of it. Because the really crucial part is perhaps not so much the fishing or the breakfast but the conversation that follows between Peter and Jesus. When Jesus asks Peter three times, "Do you love me?" And we can feel Peter becoming more and more exasperated as he answers Jesus. Peter knows that Jesus knows that he loves him. Why does he keep asking? Not for the first time, Peter is a bit slow on the uptake. Just as he had denied Jesus three times before the cock crowed, so now he has the opportunity to reverse all that by confessing his love. Peter is given a second chance. A new beginning. And a new purpose. Previously, Peter had denied Jesus three times in order to avoid death. Now, by affirming his love for Jesus, he has set himself on a path to martyrdom. But he does it willingly. As he wished he had on Good Friday. Before that though, he was called to be leader of the church. To feed Christ's sheep. Fearful, fallible Peter was called to build up the church just as Paul was called. Both stories are a reminder that we don't have to be perfect for God to use us. We don't have to have all the answers. God can use all of us to share the good news.

The Bible is full of second chances. Noah and the flood. Jonah and the whale. Joseph and his brothers. Moses. Women having children late in life. Jesus healing people of all sorts of things. Bringing some of them back to life. The resurrection itself is the perhaps the biggest second chance ever and it has a universal significance. So often, the world is slow to give people second chances. It is quick to write them off. To dismiss them. They didn't do well at school or have been in prison or they are disabled or they are homeless or addicted to drugs or alcohol. For many people second chances can be in short supply. But the message of the resurrection is that everyone deserves a second chance. A new beginning. A clean slate. Not because of what we do or don't do but because of God's grace.

Jesus didn't need any of those 153 fish. It wasn't because of what Peter brought with him that Jesus welcomed him to breakfast. It was because he was loved. It was because of God's grace. Practical Peter had to learn to live by that grace. In the past he had fastened his own belt and had gone where he wished. In the future someone else would fasten his belt and take him where he didn't want to go. When he said this, Jesus was warning Peter about how he would die. But he was also telling him how he should live. He would have to rely more on God and on God's grace.

And that seems so easy to say and so hard to learn. To learn to live by grace. Most of us like to be in control. We are tough on ourselves and tough on others. Even the most kind-hearted of us make a thousand judgements about ourselves and other people every day. And I'm pretty sure that most of those judgements are harsher than the judgements that God makes. The good news of the resurrection is that we don't have to earn our place in heaven and that no one is beyond the limits of God's love. No one is written off. Nothing is beyond God's forgiveness and understanding. Everyone deserves a second chance. And that's something to hold on to in this Easter season. The good news of the resurrection, of second chances, is for us and for all those we encounter. All are welcome at the Lord's table and nothing and no one is beyond the limits of God's love.