

3rd Sunday of Easter, Year C

Zephaniah 3.14-20 • Psalm 30 • Acts 9.1-6 • John 21.1-19

St Luke's, Chelsea

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I can almost picture the scene as it was shown in my children's Bible. A large lake stretches over the whole of the left-hand side of the page, with a pebbly shore on the right-hand side, and hills lightly sketched across the background. On the pebbly shore a lone man stands in a white robe, smiling caringly out into the lake. And on the lake, a small boat crammed with seven men, who are struggling to pull over the side of their boat an enormous, bulging, net of wriggling fish.

And then, as an adult, I find myself almost automatically imagining the more cinematic qualities to this moment. Perhaps there is a thin layer of morning mist hanging in the air over the lake. It's likely there's still a crisp chill in the air, with the rising sun a welcome antidote to the cold of the night. I turn my attention to the boat and watch as the disciples excitedly, frantically work to haul in the fish, the boat bobbing around to and fro and water splashing over the sides. From the perspective of the disciples I see the figure on the lakeshore, silhouetted in my mind's eye. Cut to the view from the lakeshore and I see a man waiting calmly, listening with joy as the cries of the men on the boat carry to him over the still surface of the waters.

I'm no fisherman, but anyone who has spent time with rods or nets will surely recognise something of what the disciples felt as they began to tug on the net, and realised that something extraordinary was about to appear from out of the murky waters. 153 fish, John tells us, came up in that net. The number clearly indicates some kind of perfection, though exactly why is hard to say. It's the sum of a perfect triangle with a base of 17; 17 is the sum of the 12 loaves and 5 fish leftover from the feeding of the five thousand... that's the kind of thing that John probably has in mind. It's also the kind of number to which you can imagine the wizened, cynical old boatman on the sea shore raising his eyebrow when the story gets passed on in the local village: 'yeah, right!'

Resurrection life, John seems to be telling us, is life in abundance. But the resurrection abundance we hear of in this story is not first and foremost an abundance of 'stuff'. It's not the point of faith to bring us more fish – by which we might mean: better clothes, a bigger house, more money. Instead, in their encounter with Jesus on the lakeshore, the disciples encounter an abundance of grace. It's this grace – this divine life breaking into the world – that is the abundance of resurrection life.

We see that grace as the story continues. There's grace as the disciples stand with Jesus on the lakeshore, eating bread and fish together.¹ The disciples know it's Jesus, even if they don't recognise him. I'm reminded of the stained glass windows at Christ Church in Southwark, just south of Blackfriars Bridge. Those postwar windows show scenes from the local area: a number 4 Routemaster bus, workers in Bankside Power Station, the nearby head office of Sainsbury's. 'Keep alert!' the message might be; 'You know that God is at work out there. So keep your eyes open. Are you going to recognise God around you?'

And, above all, there's an abundance of grace in that encounter between Jesus and Peter. On the night of his arrest Peter denies Jesus three times. Now, Peter responds to a further three questions, this time from Jesus, and each time he responds with the words 'Lord, ... you know that I love you'. And with that, Jesus calls Peter again to follow him. The scene is a touching moment: of reconciliation, of restoration, of Peter being commissioned again in his greatest calling. But, it's worth noting, it's not a moment where Jesus demands repentance from Peter, or where Jesus shows the need to proclaim forgiveness. For that divine forgiveness has already happened, on the cross. Jesus's invitation to Peter is not conditional; it demands no grovelling. With grace, Jesus calls Peter again to follow him.

So where, this Easter season, do you long for this abundance in your life? For there are aspects in all our lives where it might feel, like the disciples, that we have been fishing all night but caught nothing. It might be in having the basic material necessities for life for which so many around the world long for: food; clean water; medicine. It might be in friendship; in compassion; in joy; in

¹ Perhaps there's also grace in the net that hauls up so many fish, but 'was not torn', as a metaphor for the grace present in the life of the church?

experiencing the generosity of giving and receiving; in making peace with long-standing hurts; in forgiveness or reconciliation. It might be, like the disciples on the beach or on the road to Emmaus, having your eyes opened to see Christ in the world around you. But beware – as Jesus warns Peter, don't come expecting a cosy life and no surprises. For as we allow ourselves to be opened up – to others, and to Christ – we may find ourselves led in new directions, to places 'where [we] do not wish to go', but where we know we must: for our good, the good of the world, and the good of God.

This is the abundance that Jesus proclaims in the miraculous haul of fishes. It's a net brimming over with life. It's more food and nourishment than we can know what to do with. It's life that is so full of energy that it seems to want to pull us overboard, out of the safety of our boat; life that causes us like Peter to cast off dignity and dive into the water. It's no mere illustration; it's not a movie. By the grace of God, it's resurrection life.