

Intro

Let's say you've had a really busy, or difficult time. Where would you go to recuperate, to relax, to recharge, to just be? It could be a favourite armchair, or it could be home with the doors locked, or your garden, or a favourite holiday destination, or even a church.

Where are the disciples in John 21? Geographically, they are in Galilee – the sea of Tiberias. I think there are a couple of reasons for this. Specifically they were following the command of Christ, who told them to go there after his resurrection. But I also think that they go to the place they know will restore them. Galilee and Judaea are only 80 miles apart, but the big city – with up to a million people there for the festival, and the calm and beauty of Galilee are light years apart. They went back to the place they knew meant safety.

Why? Because where they are emotionally is all over the place they are all over the place. Remember that it takes them ages finally to realise that the resurrection has happened, and changes everything. They just haven't got a clue what to do, or how to do it. They are in a traumatised and exhilarated limbo. What do you do after a time of great stress, or trauma, or busy-ness? In our house, you tidy up! Or scrub the kitchen floor. Or sort the fish out. You do something you can control, and which has results.

What the disciples do is to go back to what they know, in the place they know best.

1. They embrace the old.

They go fishing, back on home territory. They have had three years away, and there is nothing better to do, and it is what they are familiar with, and at least they will get some results.

In a changing world it is tempting to just look back, and do what you did before. Such looking back, going back to what we knew is always an issue for the church. Interestingly, with regard to tradition, what people want to go back to is what they knew when they were younger, so 'what we've always done' is actually not so, it's what you first encountered, or what you can remember with clarity. It's almost certain that what you think of as being traditional was regarded as dangerously modern by the people then who were as old as you are now.

Don't feel bad about it. The disciples did just the same. But be aware of it. Things change, and we have to as well.

2. Because they go back they fall down in the present

They know how to fish. They have the right equipment, all the knowledge, and are in the right place. Just like old times, they might think. But their world has changed, and what was good then is no good now. They catch nothing. Today's church could bemoan all sorts of things.

Sundays are radically different from my youth. There are fewer clergy around. There's no religion on the telly, hardly. People live together before they marry, if they marry – and so on. In all sorts of ways, though, we would be better to adapt, where we can, to a changing world.

This isn't about being needlessly trendy or superficially 'attractive', but about knowing the way the world goes. The disciples go back too far, to a world which will never be again.

3. They meet with the Risen Christ

They fail to catch anything, and then see a figure on the shore. And they recognise the risen Christ. They've seen him before, but it's just beginning to make a new kind of sense to them now. When they do what he says they catch 153 fish (either that's all the known species in the world, or $1+2+3+4+5$ etc up to 17).

They use their old equipment, and all their old skills, but they do so in a new way with a new purpose under a new command, and get the job done.

This is not just about fishing. This is written to the newly formed Christian mission in a hostile and difficult and wonderful world. It is written to new Christians and to us 2000 years later. It is about being church. Remember Jesus promising the disciples that they would 'fish for people'? If we do it the old way for the old ways sake, and we will die. Use the old ways and embrace the new, and listen to Christ and we will catch fish.

But also notice this. Christ feeds them, with fish he's already caught (did you spot that? He's already got fish on the go).

Not only does he give them a new purpose, he sustains them on the way. In Galilee there's a church which commemorates this event. It's called The Church of the Primacy of Peter, because of what comes next in the story. It's tiny! And in it there's a flat rock, called Mensa Christi – the Table of Christ. It's where he's supposed to have built his charcoal fire and barbecued his fish. In an ordinary place Jesus does an ordinary thing. But it's an extraordinary event because, for the disciples, they know they have met with the risen Christ in a way which lets them know exactly what they'll be doing next. Fishing properly, sustained by the fisherman who's done it first. Excited?

4. They get a new purpose.

Or at least, fishing for people takes on a new meaning – they will do it for Christ and with Christ. And for Peter this entails being restored through Jesus's forgiveness, and given a particular purpose – to feed Christ's sheep. Repentance leads to new life.

Conclusion.

How will the church survive, and grow? Not by being trendy - but by meeting with the risen Christ, listening to him, and understanding and challenging a changed world. In Devon there's a small chain of fish restaurants, called Rockfish. Its motto is 'Tomorrow's fish are still in the sea. We will get nowhere by going back, for its own sake. We will do great things when we recognise Christ on the shore, when we are fed by him, and when we fish in his power and at his command. So let's do it.