

# Seeing is Believing ...

*... or is it?*

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*A sermon given on the Third Sunday of Easter, 4th May 2025, by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster.*

*John 21:1-19*

I wonder, what does it mean to believe? Before his crucifixion, Jesus said, *"Believe in God, believe also in me."* But in this morning's reading from the Gospel, Jesus's disciples seem to confuse believing with seeing. Philip wants to see God. And after the resurrection, Thomas famously says, *"Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."*

So what about you? Would believing be easier if you could 'see' Jesus or 'see' God? Today's Gospel reading suggests that seeing is not the same as believing. When the disciples in the story see Jesus on the lakeside they don't at first recognise him, even though they can see him. They don't understand, they don't believe and they remain, spiritually speaking, in the dark. Yet the text does talk about Jesus 'showing' himself to them. It's a story not so much about 'seeing' as about 'revelation', and a revelation has to be received before anything can be understood.

And in this story, it's gradual - the disciples go on a journey from 'not knowing' to 'knowing'. In verse 4, we are told Jesus stood on the beach but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. But by the time we get to verse 12, we're told none of the disciples dared to ask him who are you? Because they knew it was the Lord. So what's happened in between? How has the seeing come to become a revelation, a belief?

There are basically three things going on here. First of all, Jesus has given the disciples a command when he sees them in the boat on the lake, but with empty nets - he commands them to cast the net to the right side of the boat and they obeyed. Even though they had been fishing all night and caught nothing, they trusted this figure on the lakeside enough to carry out his instruction. And as a result, they were blessed with an abundance of fish as their nets were filled. So that's one milestone on the journey from doubt to belief: do what you believe God wants you to do - you will find your emptiness is replaced by God's abundance; seek to follow Jesus's commands and belief will follow; practise generosity and you will receive; seek the kingdom of God first and you'll find your other desires will be satisfied or will fade away; forgive others and you'll experience the overwhelming mercy of God; pray by yourself and you'll know that you are never alone. All of these are ways of obeying Jesus's commands and of discovering that your nets being filled; live as you think Jesus wants you to live and believing in him will follow naturally.

Then the next milestone is when the disciple whom Jesus loved says to Peter, *"It is the Lord."* The disciple whom Jesus loved has come to a point of recognition and Peter impulsively jumps into the sea and heads for the shore where he finds Jesus. So Peter's believing comes about, at least in part, as a result of hearing the testimony of the beloved disciple. And that has always been an important part of how people come to believe in Jesus - when they hear others talking about how they can come to recognise Jesus and come to faith. Last week we started a new Alpha course and there were nearly 30 guests, not counting the leaders and hosts - I don't think I've ever been involved in a Christian Basics course where there have been so many new people attending and

it's not because I invited them or because we ran some big marketing campaign. It's chiefly because the people who did one of the Alpha courses last year invited their friends - people who have come to believe have shared a little bit of their own story with others. And if you have a faith, chances are it's because somebody else at some point gave you the impression that their belief was important and real and living - and then you wanted to find out a bit more for yourself.

And then the third thing that takes the disciples forward on their journey from not knowing Jesus to knowing that it was the Lord, was this shared meal with Jesus in the midst of them. There is this breakfast where Jesus says, "*Come and have breakfast.*" And it echoes very closely the story earlier in John's Gospel of the feeding of the 5,000 - another story of abundance, of Jesus feeding people with bread and fish; where he invites them to contribute food, but where actually he's already provided it himself. The language is the language of Holy Communion, where Jesus is the host who invites, who came and took the bread and gave it to them; who provides more than enough; and who, after the earlier story, says, "*I am the bread of life, the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever.*" Here in the setting of this meal which we shall be celebrating this morning, none of the disciples dared to ask, who are you? because they knew it was the Lord - belief had taken them beyond merely seeing.

And so it is for you and me, we grow into a deeper knowing and a more confident belief as we take part week by week in this little meal where we share the testimony of the Scriptures and where we receive bread and wine from Christ, who is our host. We are nourished by him, and we receive him and we come to recognise him and know that he is in our midst.

And in these three ways, the text of John chapter 21, enables a transition from the previous chapter, which was all about the upper room and the disciples seeing the risen Lord and Thomas questioning it. And it's as if there is a transition going on from the first generation of believers - those who are able literally to 'see' Jesus as Thomas demanded. We see this transition going on to something that is available to all who come later, those who will be blessed because they believe even though they do not see. The Thomas story ends with Jesus saying, "*How blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.*" And here in chapter 21, we see how that can be possible: by listening to the words of Jesus and keeping his commandments; by listening to the testimony of other disciples; and by taking part in community gatherings around meals where the presence of Jesus is acknowledged.

And as the story of Peter goes on to show, belief is further strengthened by the assurance that Jesus loves and nourishes you, whoever you are, whatever you've done, however hard you may find it, to forgive yourself and to love yourself.

So there are many other different routes to belief in Christ but what they tell us together, and what is at the heart of this Easter story is that actually, 'physical seeing' is possibly the least important element of it all.

# Reading Text

## John 21:1-19

<sup>1</sup> After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. <sup>2</sup> Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. <sup>3</sup> Simon Peter said to them, 'I am going fishing.' They said to him, 'We will go with you.' They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. <sup>4</sup> Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. <sup>5</sup> Jesus said to them, 'Children, you have no fish, have you?' They answered him, 'No.' <sup>6</sup> He said to them, 'Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.' So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. <sup>7</sup> That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, 'It is the Lord!' When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the lake. <sup>8</sup> But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off. <sup>9</sup> When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. <sup>10</sup> Jesus said to them, 'Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.' <sup>11</sup> So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. <sup>12</sup> Jesus said to them, 'Come and have breakfast.' Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, 'Who are you?' because they knew it was the Lord. <sup>13</sup> Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. <sup>14</sup> This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead. <sup>15</sup> When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my lambs.' <sup>16</sup> A second time he said to him, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Tend my sheep.' <sup>17</sup> He said to him the third time, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, 'Do you love me?' And he said to him, 'Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my sheep. <sup>18</sup> Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.' <sup>19</sup> (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, 'Follow me.'