

Lent Compline Talks 2019
St Mary's Kidlington

Prof John Morris

April 15th Monday of Holy Week: Jesus at the sea of Galilee

One thing that strikes anyone who reads through all four gospel accounts of the appearances of the resurrected Jesus is how little they agree with one another in terms of what happened when and where. Indeed, if they were four witnesses in a court of law, their testimony would be ripped to shreds by an opposing counsel on grounds of inconsistency. However, that very inconsistency argues strongly against any suggestion that there was some sort of collusion among Jesus' followers or the gospel writers to give credibility to a mission they had determined on. What really matters, as the great Jesus scholar Geza Vermes argues, is not the detail, but the overriding evidence that, within a short time after the crucifixion, the terrified small group of the followers of Jesus, still hiding from the public gaze, all at once underwent an experience - the conviction that they had witnessed a living Jesus - and that experience was so strong that it transformed them into fearless spiritual warriors, healing in the name of Jesus and openly proclaiming the gospel they had received from Him to the Jewish authorities, to Romans, to all they met.

This evening I'd like to concentrate on the resurrection appearances in Galilee and what we can learn from them. Galilee was, of course, the disciples familiar home ground. It was on the sea of Galilee (sometimes called Lake Tiberias or Lake of Gennesaret) that many of the disciples had been fishermen and it was where Jesus had quelled the storm that threatened their boat and their lives.

What do the gospels tell us? In both Mark and Luke, we read that, at the empty tomb, the angel tells the women that Jesus is going before them to Galilee and that they must tell the disciples to leave for Galilee where they will see Jesus again. Then, a little later, and only in Matthew, 'the eleven disciples made their way to Galilee ... when they saw him they fell prostrate before him, though some were doubtful'. Luke has no mention of an encounter in Galilee, but John has the quite detailed story of what happened when the disciples had returned to Galilee as instructed. There Peter, returning to the only thing he knew, says "I'm going fishing" to which Thomas, the two sons of Zebedee (James the greater and John), two other unnamed disciples, and Nathanael of Cana-in-Galilee say they will join him, all apparently in one boat.

Nathanael, you may remember, appeared right at the start of John's gospel when Jesus met Philip and said to him 'Follow me' whereupon Philip went to find his friend Nathanael and said to him "We have found the man spoken of by Moses and the Prophets - Jesus from Nazareth", to which Nathanael retorts "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?". Jesus, however, on seeing Nathanael said "Here is an Israelite in whom nothing is false", to which Nathanael asks "How do you know me?". Jesus then explains using a figure of speech that apparently refers to studying the Torah, at which Nathanael exclaims "You are the Son of God, the King of Israel". Nathanael was his given name. Scholars think he can be identified with the apostle Bartholomew (from the family name, Bar Tolmai) in part because, so often, he is linked with Philip.

Be that as it may, they'd gone out night fishing - fishing was traditionally done at night with lamps. There was no refrigeration at that time so that, if the fish were to be fresh for the market that day they had to be landed early in the morning. That night they caught nothing and, as they neared shore, someone standing on the beach called out "Friends, have you caught anything?" When they answered "No" the figure on the beach (who they did not recognise) said "Shoot out the net to starboard and you will make a

catch". They did so, and made a huge catch which nearly broke their nets. Then, the disciple identified in John's gospel only as "the disciple whom Jesus loved", recognises the figure on the shore and exclaims to Peter "It is the Lord" and it is Simon Peter, impetuous as ever, who jumps overboard and swims to the shore, the rest hauling in the boat and their catch. On the shore is a fire, and Jesus invites them to bring some of the fish and have breakfast - but, apparently, they still do not dare ask him "Who are you?" even though, it's said, "They knew it was the Lord".

You'll have noticed that it was "the disciple who Jesus loved" who first recognises the stranger on the shore. Who is this disciple that only John's gospel refers to in this enigmatic way? Although a few sources think it is Lazarus, the vast majority think it is John himself because at the very end of John's gospel comes the statement "It is this same disciple who attests to what is here written; it is in fact he who wrote it". This was the disciple who asked Jesus, at the last supper, "who will betray you?" This was the disciple who stood at the foot of the cross and to whom the dying Jesus entrusted his mother, and this was the disciple also about who, after the fish breakfast on the Galilee lake shore, when Peter asks Jesus "Lord, what will happen to him?" gets the rather curt reply "What is it to you? Follow me".

I'd like to highlight four things I think we can learn from this series of episodes in Galilee, all of which effectively give us the same message. First, from the very short passage in Luke, that having gone to Galilee and encountering the risen Jesus, the disciples prostrated themselves 'though some were doubtful'. Doubt and uncertainty are a part of mental awareness and, as we saw with 'doubting Thomas', doubting, provided it leads to productive questioning, can be a positive, not a negative emotion, and can deepen our faith. As far as one can judge, all the eleven apostles went on to demonstrate by their lives that they had lost any doubts of the reality of the resurrected Jesus in their lives, and that they were prepared, quite literally, to 'put their lives on the line' - few of them died peacefully their beds!

Second that, when we believe we have caught even a glimpse of our Lord, like Simon Peter in the boat, we should be urgent to follow it up and press on to gain our own closer, deeper experience of our Lord, because it is only if we get close to Jesus that we can hear his voice clearly. Tomorrow night we'll spend even more time considering Peter.

Third, we must listen to our Lord. Even when we are depressed and nothing seems to be going right, like those fishermen who believed they had just lost their Lord in the most horrific manner and, with him, all their hopes, and now had tried to fish all night to no avail; still we must listen. Jesus won't be standing on a shore, or on the other side of a road, shouting across at us "Do this, or do that" so how can we listen? I suggest by study in depth of the gospel message. Why do I stress the words "in depth"? We are so very familiar with many passages in the gospels that there can be a danger that they just 'float by' with our brain thinking 'Yes, I know that'. A few Sundays ago I was horrified to discover that, when that morning's gospel came up in our conversation, neither I nor Joyce could really remember what had been read! For this reason I find reading or discussing the thoughts of those who have made bible study a life-time's work a real help. And prayer - it may be both asking prayer "Lord, I'm in a real mess - what should I do now?" Or, equally important, it may be listening prayer - waiting in silence for that "still small voice". I suggest that the talking and listening must both be practised. If I might use the analogy of learning a foreign language, it is only by prolonged practice that any of us will be able to understand what someone who speaks that language is saying to us and be able to converse with them.

And, last but not least, there is Jesus' instruction not just to Peter but to us all: "Follow me".