

“POST-EASTER DISCIPLES”

John 21:1-14

It's a while now since the church weekend away and the opportunity that many of us had to consider the gifts that God has given us through his Holy Spirit. There was a second chance a month or so ago to reflect on that subject when Andy Twilley visited us again. And many of us took the decision on one or other of those occasions to get stuck in to working here in this community and make use of the resources – in terms of time, energy, talents, material gifts – for the glory of God. Maybe you feel that God does actually have a job for you to do. In fact, you're quite excited about it. But, despite having had a look at the various things on offer at the recent “Gifts Fair” it's difficult working out what that job might be. You've taken the first step, but things seem to have ground to a halt. Life just goes on and you can't really discover where Jesus is wanting you to work for him. What's happening?

Imagine how Peter and the other disciples must have felt in the immediate aftermath of Easter. Jesus had clearly told them to go to Galilee and wait for him. In *Matthew 28:10* and *Mark 16:7* we read that the disciples were given the message to go north, back to where they had first met Jesus and there he would meet them and tell them what to do. So they've gone back to the villages around the lakeside and there they wait for him. Maybe they were a bit apprehensive. Maybe there was a positive air of excitement. Maybe they were simply coming back down to earth after the events of the previous few days.

Whatever they were feeling, they decided to go fishing. Nothing else seemed to be happening and they might as well get on and do something constructive. (George Beasley-Murray points out in his commentary that even disciples have to eat!) But opinion is divided as to what was actually going on here. Some people see the return of the disciples to the fishing boats as a sign of running away, of giving up on all that they had learned and done over the past couple of years. It's a sign of weakness. One writer suggests that they were “*going into 'denial': maybe what has happened is beyond their ability to cope, and they simply wish to return to the uncomplicated lifestyle they had before they met Jesus.*” And her view is shared by many commentators.

Others, and I go along with this view, see the disciples as waiting for Jesus and deciding to get on and do something while they're waiting. After all, Jesus hasn't given them any firm instructions about what the next move is to be. They have yet to receive the full blessing of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. So they aren't really confident enough or equipped enough to get on with the task of evangelism which will shortly be theirs. They have the message of the good news of Jesus Christ, the proclamation of the Kingdom, but that has been radically altered by the death and resurrection of Jesus himself. It seems only natural that they should spend their time fishing – something they are used to doing and which they feel

they're good at. They've followed the first of Jesus' instructions and gone to Galilee – if they were wanting to run away they wouldn't necessarily have done that.

What's interesting is that John still refers to them as "*disciples*" all through this episode. And that's where the encouragement lies for us, I believe. These men may not be out preaching and teaching, healing the sick and exorcising demons – but they are still disciples. They are still followers of Jesus, even when they are engaged in the ordinary and the humdrum routine of everyday life. And when even that doesn't quite go as expected – the fish seem to have disappeared – they are still disciples.

I doubt very much whether many of you will be out doing spectacular things for Jesus tomorrow. Most likely, you'll be involved in what John Keble calls "*the trivial round, the common task*" – looking after your family, washing, cooking, sitting at a desk, at the wheel of your car, talking with your neighbours, all that kind of thing. Some of those things will go horribly wrong: you will get frustrated and upset. But you will still be a disciple – called by Jesus for a specific job. Perhaps you aren't yet aware what that job is. Perhaps you're desperate to find out. Perhaps for the moment your job is actually to do the things that you are doing, in full sight of your neighbours, your children, your friends, witnessing by your life to the fact that Jesus is alive and you believe it.

As they get on with the job, the disciples don't seem to be making much of a fist of it. Remember, these are mostly professional fishermen. But they fish all night and don't catch a thing. As the first rays of light begin to appear over the mountains, they see a figure on the shore who calls out to them to try and put the net down the other side. For some reason, it works and the net fills with fish – one hundred and fifty three of them. (They would probably have counted them in order to share them out, but there are some amazingly inventive theories as to the significance of the number 153!)

Presumably, by v7 the light had got stronger and the boat had drifted a bit closer to the shore, at which point one of the disciples – probably John – recognises that it is Jesus who has been calling to them. They haven't realised that it is their Master, but he has still been there all along, making a difference to what they've been doing. It's fascinating that in John's Gospel, the ministry of Jesus begins and ends with his making a difference in two very normal situations. It's this situation at the end and the wedding at Cana at the beginning. In some ways it seems such a contrast to the rest of the gospel, which tends to be thought of as very theological, very ideas-centred. Jesus makes a difference in all kinds of situations, and particularly in the everyday ones.

You see, even though we might not always realise it, Jesus is there, getting involved in our lives. There may be other things that are taking up our time and our energy, things that are frustrating us, concerning

us, annoying us, exciting us. We may have forgotten about Jesus for a while because of all these other things that are crowding in on us. But that doesn't stop Jesus being there, watching us, trying to direct our efforts in the right direction. He wants to make a difference in our lives all the time and we don't have to be on our knees, or at Spring Harvest, or on the church weekend, or even in church for him to talk to us and advise us. Even if we are not engaged in doing spectacular things for him, he still wants to be part of what we are doing – because he loves us and because we are his disciples.

Once they had realised that it was Jesus, the disciples came ashore and shared breakfast with Jesus. Jesus cooked and ate with them some of the fish that they had just caught. He was able to accept what they had just caught as part of the offering of their lives. He didn't rubbish it and say "I called you to be fishers of men. Why weren't you doing that? I'm not interested in this paltry offering. I could have got it from anyone." If we are living as disciples, Jesus is pleased to receive the offering of our whole lives – every part of it – whether it is overtly "Christian" or not.

That is, for example, the issue that many Christian artists are faced with. Do they write songs that overtly tell the gospel message, that have a kind of evangelistic message, or do they celebrate the good in life and demonstrate an alternative to the bad? Do all pictures by Christian painters have to have a biblical theme? Does every story or poem by a Christian writer have to convey an explicitly Christian message? T-Bone Burnett, the legendary Nashville producer (he was behind the hugely successful collaboration of Robert Plant and Alison Krauss) and a committed Christian, once said, "*You can either write songs about the Light or you can write songs about what you see by the Light.*" And the great Dutch art critic and theoretician Hans Rookmaaker wrote a book entitled *Art Needs No Justification*. Just get on and live your life, doing everything for the glory of God. That's what Paul writes to the Colossian Christians in 3:17,23,24.

I have mentioned this to some of you already, but it's a great example of this. Someone I know quite well who is certainly not a Christian and hasn't had a great deal of sympathy for the church generally, has been trying to arrange something in Lichfield and has had dealings with another church, where she has found them less than helpful. She knows a bit about this place here and has had some dealings with the people in the office when trying to arrange bookings and so on. I don't think the office people have been making any particular attempt to evangelise her: they've just got on and done things "*as working for the Lord*", but this person said to Sally a couple of weeks back, "Why can't all Christians be like you people at Wade Street Church?"

That's why I find this story immensely encouraging, especially at those times when it doesn't seem as if I'm making any great impact (that's all the time, really!). It's good to know that I am still a disciple and Jesus is still there even when I'm not necessarily conscious of it.

And it was immediately after this, while the others were still sitting around, that Jesus spoke to Peter and gave him the next step, the next set of instructions. He was to be given responsibility for looking after Jesus' "*sheep*". He was to follow Jesus' own example in his life. And, as we now know, it wasn't too long after this episode that the Holy Spirit came powerfully into the disciples' lives to enable them to get on and fulfil the next part of the plan. Jesus hadn't forgotten them. He remained faithful to his promises.

Jesus hasn't forgotten you. He has his plan for your life and he will show you what the next step is to be. Just keep doing what you believe is right now and, in his own good time, he'll show you where the next piece of the jigsaw fits. He still loves you. He still sees you as a disciple. He is still there, even if you can't make him out terribly clearly at the moment.

Be encouraged. You are a disciple of Jesus Christ even when you're not trying to be. That's maybe a particular word to the elders whom we shall be ordaining and inducting in a few minutes time. And Jesus is there, involved in your life, even when it's not immediately obvious. The Risen Lord Jesus Christ has chosen you and is using you as part of his plan. And what's more – there are even better things ahead if you're prepared to wait and to be faithful.

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Sometimes we feel that God has a particular job for us to do, but we're not quite sure what it is, or maybe things don't seem to be working out as we think they should. Imagine how Peter and the other disciples must have felt in the immediate aftermath of Easter. Jesus had clearly told them to go to Galilee and wait for him. So they've gone back to the villages around the lakeside and there they wait for him. Maybe they were a bit apprehensive. Maybe there was a positive air of excitement. Maybe they were simply coming back down to earth after the events of the previous few days.

Whatever they were feeling, they decided to go fishing. Some people see the return of the disciples to the fishing boats as a sign of running away, a sign of weakness. Others see the disciples as waiting for Jesus and deciding to get on and do something while they're waiting. They have yet to receive the full blessing of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

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As they get on with the job, they fish all night and don't catch a thing. But Jesus is there to help them. In John's Gospel, the ministry of Jesus begins and ends with his making a difference in two very normal situations. It's this situation at the end and the wedding at Cana at the beginning. Jesus makes a difference in all kinds of situations, and particularly in the everyday ones.

Even though we might not always realise it, Jesus is there, getting involved in our lives. He wants to make a difference in our lives all the time and we don't have to be on our knees, or at Spring Harvest, or on the church weekend, or even in church for him to talk to us and advise us – because he loves us and because we are his disciples. And if we are living as disciples, Jesus is pleased to receive the offering of our whole lives – every part of it – whether it is overtly "Christian" or not. It's good to know that we are still disciples and Jesus is still there even when we're not necessarily conscious of it. Be encouraged. You are a disciple of Jesus Christ even when you're not trying to be.

Questions for discussion

1. What do you think about the disciples going back to their boats after Easter?
2. In what ways can we detect Jesus at work in our everyday lives?
3. Jesus was physically there and called out to the disciples with advice. How does he help and advise us today? How do we know it is him?
4. Jesus had already started to cook their breakfast, but he still asked for some of their fish, even though he didn't need it. To what extent does Jesus **need** our contributions to his mission on earth? If he doesn't need us, what's the point of getting involved?
5. Do you think of yourself as a disciple of Jesus? How often? In what circumstances?
6. Does the idea of your being a disciple of Jesus affect the way you behave? If so, how? If not, why not?