

## **‘Back to Life’**

(John 21:1) “Afterwards Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Tiberius. It happened this way . . .”

In a recent article written for The Guardian, Giles Frazer wrote, *“Arson, heroin needles, mass brawls – my parish church sees it all. But the Easter story is who we are, and allows us to push back against the darkness.*

*The resurrection is not an argument, still less a philosophical argument. That’s why rational scepticism about the empty tomb just bounces off the surface. As Jonathan Swift was right to say, you can’t reason people out of something they weren’t reasoned into. The resurrection is more an identity than an argument. That’s why we turn it into participatory theatre, with incense and candles. It is who we are – our word for how we go on in the face of overwhelming odds. It’s the Christian term for defiance.”*

There is little sense of that at the beginning of John chapter 21. Here is more a sense of resignation, than defiance. Reminiscent of earlier times, the scene opens on seven of the disciples fishing. This is like a ‘flash back’ to when they had been called, when we see Simon Peter and his companions doing what they did, in other words, they had gone back to the life they knew – before; before they met him, before they followed him, before they believed in him, and, yes, before they betrayed him. But that was then, now they were back home, and all of that seemed like a dream.

“I’m going fishing,” says Simon Peter. “We’ll go with you,” replied the others (and you can hear the resignation in their voices). Then, to add to their misery, they caught nothing. As a young lad my Dad took me fishing on the River Tyne, often by Hexham, Corbridge or Wylam. Even though we went on many trips, I cannot remember ever catching a thing! So, we had to return home before the fish monger closed because we had promised my mother that we would provide for that evening’s tea. In light of that, those fellows on the Sea of Tiberius have got my sympathy. Such was their ‘gloom and doom’ that they could not see beyond their despair, even when he called to them they could not see the truth before their very eyes. This is somewhat surprising because they had experienced resurrection, including Thomas who was known for his scepticism. But that had happened in Jerusalem, a very different place and time. But now they were back in Galilee, back to work, back to life – ordinary life, and so was Jesus.

In 1941 Fr Jacques Loew began work on the docks of Marseilles, and his ministry started the Worker Priest movement. Loew had been sent by his Dominican Father Lebreton to “study the condition of the working classes”, not to actually join the workers. But on the docks Loew joined the workers. By 1944 worker priest missions had been established in Paris, Lyon and Marseilles. Note the date, this was ‘Occupied France’ under Nazi rule. The hope was that the worker priests, who were young men wearing secular clothes and going manual labour, would restore confidence, hope and faith, by demonstrating God’s blessing on life and work.

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“Throw your net on the other side,” said Jesus. And they did. And their gloom was lifted, their doom was dispelled, and their despair turned to hope, because their nets were full to breaking, demonstrating God’s blessing on their life on work - now resurrection was known in Galilee.

As I said at the beginning, this story is reminiscent of earlier times, because it echoes an incident recorder in Luke chapter 5, when these fishermen were called to follow Jesus after they had shown their faith in him by going into the deeper water. But in John 21 the story takes on a different meaning, because this is the Risen Christ, the Lord of New Life, who calls them, once again. He calls them by changing their working practices, tearing up the ‘rule book’: “Throw your net on the other side.” What does that mean to us? (A discussion took place at that point, and the feedback from it included comments about being prepared to step out of our ‘comfort zones’, to identify those people whose lives we do not touch as a city centre church, and how we must think about promoting ourselves and our activities so that our mission is appropriate and accessible to those around us.)

Then after breakfast, when they enjoyed the fruits of their labour, a new commandment is given, “Feed my lambs; take care of my sheep; feed my sheep.” No longer a sense of resignation, this is recommissioning because now Jesus has come back, back to life, everyday life. This is resurrection, God-given defiance, making us live and love against the odds.

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