

<b>Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> April 2016</b> <b>Cathedral, Grahamstown</b> <b>7.30 &amp; 9.30 a.m.</b>		<b>3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Easter</b> <b>(2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Easter)</b>
Acts 9:1-6 (7-20)	Psalm 30	Revelation 5:11-14
		John 21:1-19
<b>DO YOU LOVE ME?</b>		

“When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?’ Peter said to Jesus, ‘Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Feed my lambs.’ ” (John 21:15)

## **Eastertide**

We are in the season of Easter – Easter is not a day, but a season - the great Fifty Days of celebration of the resurrection of Christ from the dead, the heart of the Christian faith. We celebrate Christ’s victory of sin and evil and death.

As we say in the Eucharistic prayer during Eastertide: “By his death he has destroyed death, and by his rising again he has restored to us eternal life.”<sup>1</sup> Words of hope and wonder and new life, new possibilities.

During the Fifty Days of Easter our scripture readings focus on people’s encounter with the Risen Christ, and the ways in which we meet with the Risen Christ in our lives today.

Over these past few Sundays, we have gone with the women to the tomb of Christ on Easter Day, and found it empty; we have been with Mary as she meets the Risen Lord in the garden; we have been with Thomas as he refuses to believe, and then as Jesus appears once again, shows him his wounds, and Thomas surrenders in faith with the words “My Lord and my God”.

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<sup>1</sup> *An Anglican Prayer Book 1989*, 136

## Healing, forgiveness, commissioning

Our readings today: Acts 9 – the Risen Christ appears to Saul on the road to Damascus; Revelation 5 – the Lamb who was slain lives for ever.

The encounter of the disciples with the Risen Lord, at the lakeside – today’s Gospel reading (John 21:1-19) is a story of restoration, forgiveness, new life, and hope. We last met Simon Peter on Maundy Thursday, when he denied, three times, knowing the Lord.

But now, as our Gospel reading unfolds, Simon Peter is simply “going fishing”, picking up where he was before Jesus had called him to be a disciple. It was a return to his old way of life, old paths, back to the time before he had met and come to know the Lord. “Gone fishing” is often a joke – a way to escape from the rat race, to get away from it all, to retreat into our own world. Perhaps for Simon Peter, it was a way to escape from his disappointment, his denial of the Lord, his failure, the loss of hope. Good Friday was the end of a dream. And so he and the others decided to go fishing.

And, as had happened before (Luke 5:5) they worked all night, but caught nothing. Jesus met them on the lakeside, told them to “cast the net on the right side of the boat” (the similar story in Luke’s Gospel records Jesus as saying “cast your nets into the deep water”) and “now they were not able to haul in the net, for the quantity of fish.” It was then that the disciples realised that it was the Lord who was speaking to them.

The story continues, with a meal of fish and bread, the disciples being fed by the Lord just as He had fed them before (John 6:1-11), around a fire. It was around a fire at the house of the High Priest that Peter had stood, warming himself (John 18:18), the fire at which Peter was standing when he denied, three times, knowing the Lord.

Now, once again, Peter finds himself around the fire, in the presence of Jesus. There, around the coals of his failure, that the Risen Christ

asks Peter, three times, “Do you love me?” Three times, to eradicate and erase Peter’s three-fold denial. Three times, for Peter to say, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” Three times, for the Lord to commission him, “Feed my sheep.”

The old fire, the old coals of his failure and weakness and denial become now the new fire, the new flame, of restoration and reaffirmation.

The place of Peter’s greatest failure and weakness – perhaps his pride, perhaps his dependence on his own strength – becomes the place and moment for Peter to know the Lord’s love and forgiveness, and to be charged and commissioned to feed the flock, the people of God. How wonderful that when Peter faced his greatest failures, his weaknesses, that he was able to receive the Lord’s love and forgiveness most profoundly.

I am especially struck by how Jesus calls Peter out, but not by accusing him or blaming him. Jesus could have said, “Peter, how could you have let me down like that! What a weakling you were! You were so useless! Unreliable! Pathetic! A coward! We relied on you, but you dropped us. We don’t need you here. Leave us!”

Or he could have said, “Peter, never mind, you were having a bad day, it was a mistake, you didn’t realise what was happening, we won’t talk about it, we shall simply forget about it and move on.”

But instead Jesus invites him to face what happened by asking him to affirm once again – do you love me? The weakness of fear and failure is replaced by the strength and the durability of love. And because there is now love, Peter can be given the new task – to feed and tend the sheep, the flock of God, the church.

## **Eucharistic community of new life**

We find in this Gospel story an invitation to reflect deeply on the coals, the fire, of our own denials of Christ, our failures – and an opportunity for new beginnings.

We come here in worship to sit round the fire with the Lord – to share a meal, the meal of the Eucharist, the meal that restores us. We know our failures, our denials of Christ, the times we have betrayed Him. The Lord does not scold us or berate us and write us off as useless or unreliable or unworthy. Instead, He asks us, “Do you love me?”

Worship brings us back to this place of asking, “Do you love me?”

And we respond, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”

This Eucharistic meal that we share is our time with Jesus. We hear him call us once again from our fruitless fishing boat, our long dark nights of emptiness, to join him on the lake shore. He invites us to eat with him, to receive from him, to be restored by him.

Like Peter we join the Lord around the new fire, the fire of restoration; we hear the Lord’s questions to us; we are invited to answer with words of love and commitment. And we are commissioned and sent out. What grace Jesus gives us. What love.

There has been a great deal of comment on social media, following the Archbishop of Canterbury’s statement regarding the discovery that he was born as a result of a brief affair his mother had, and not with the man he thought was his father.

In a personal statement released this past Friday, Archbishop Justin said,

“I know that I find who I am in Jesus Christ, not in genetics, and my identity in him never changes... Although there are elements of sadness, and even tragedy in my father’s (Gavin Welby’s) case, this

is a story of redemption and hope from a place of tumultuous difficulty and near despair in several lives. *It is a testimony to the grace and power of Christ to liberate and redeem us, grace and power which is offered to every human being.* (my emphasis)

“At the very outset of my inauguration service [as Archbishop of Canterbury] three years ago ... a young member of the Canterbury Cathedral congregation said: ‘We greet you in the name of Christ. Who are you, and why do you request entry?’ To which I responded: ‘I am Justin, a servant of Jesus Christ, and I come as one seeking the grace of God to travel with you in His service together.’ What has changed? Nothing!”<sup>2</sup>

So this resurrection story brings you and me, all of us, face to face with the grace and love of Christ. Jesus invites us to discover – to rediscover – God’s love for you and me; and to discover the Lord’s grace as he redeems us and saves us and makes us whole.

At the top of many older churches, is a wind-vane, shaped like a rooster – a reminder of the cock that crowed after Peter had denied the Lord. But the rooster is close to the altar, the place of forgiveness, the sanctuary of love, the cross of Christ on which Jesus shed his blood for Peter, for you and me, to save and restore the world.

However, there are times when we may still be sitting huddled around the fire of denial and betrayal, the coals of our fear, the fire of our failures – and we may be unable, unwilling, to hear the Lord asking us, “Do you love me?”

This past week, following the Constitutional Court ruling on the role and authority of the Public Protector, specifically in the matter of Nkandla, many public figures in our country have remained stubbornly seated at the fire of denial, the fire of betrayal.

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<sup>2</sup> *A Personal Statement by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby.* 8<sup>th</sup> April 2016. <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org>

We salute those, particularly in the ANC, who were brave enough to speak out and call for the resignation or recall of President Zuma. Sometimes that kind of courage does mean to stand alone and swim against the tide. There has been a great deal of heart-searching amongst key public and national figures, and some – including many of our church leaders, Archbishop Thabo, the SACC, the Methodist Church, Archbishop Njongonkulu Ndungane, and others - have chosen to say, “Enough is enough.” We thank them, and we join with them in calling for a new commitment on the part of government to honesty, transparency, servant leadership, an end to self-enrichment. We need our leaders to do some serious soul-searching.

But the soul-searching is for all in our country, and certainly for us as the church, the people of God, as Jesus asks each one of us, ‘Do you love me?’

And it is as the church, the people of God, that the Lord asks us, “Do you love me?” In our questions about what it means to be inclusive and welcoming to Christians who are gay or lesbian - the LGBTI community, the Lord asks “Do you love me?” As we celebrate our diversity, and do so with our different languages and cultures, and see how we journey and walk together in spite of our painful and divided history, the Lord asks us, “Do you love me?” As Anglican leaders gather for the Anglican Consultative Council in Zambia, and reflect on how we can witness together to the good news of Jesus, the Lord asks, “Do you love me?”

## **CONCLUSION**

We join the Risen Christ at the lakeside, around the new fire of hope and restoration and forgiveness. He breaks the bread and the fish, gives it to us, and asks us once again, “Do you love me?”  
What is our answer?

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