

**ADDRESS****10 April 2016****3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Easter**


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Acts 9.1-6 [7-20]	Paul's vision of Jesus
Psalms 30	A song of the dedication of the Temple
Revelation 5.6-14	Christ in glory
John 21.1-19	Jesus appears to his disciples in Galilee

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*Open our minds, O Lord, to hear and understand your Word, and open our hearts to do your will. We ask in Jesus' name. AMEN.*

Last week, our Gospel reading took us to Jerusalem, to the room where the disciples were hiding behind locked doors for fear of the Jews. It is a week after Jesus' first appearance to them in that same room. Again, locked doors cannot keep Jesus out, and he appears among them with a fundamental message: that faith is more to be trusted than sight. *Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.*

Today, our Gospel reading takes us to Galilee, to the region where Jesus lived and taught. It is at least a week later, but the disciples have still not come to terms with the death of the master for whom they had given up their old lives to follow for three years. You can hear the frustration in Peter's voice as he says, *I am going fishing*. In other words, *'It's back to work fellers. It's been a great three years, but it's over'*. And the others follow him.

Clearly they had not got the message. They were still living in the age of sight; they had not moved into the new age, the age of faith. So Jesus appeared again, for the third time, the gospel says, and he completes the message.

In a way, this runs parallel to the writing of the gospel itself. Many commentators call this final chapter an epilogue. Certainly it is an addition, because the gospel writer had signed off his story at the end of chapter 20, as we saw last week. But it is an early addition, because it is in all surviving manuscripts of the gospel. It is as if the writer has come across new material which gives added meaning and significance to what he has already recorded.

In the 40 days between Easter and Ascension, the gospels record 10 appearances of the risen Jesus to his disciples. The appearances come to different people in different places; but, when we read them carefully, we see they have three common features –

First, in every case, the appearances are unexpected. Jesus takes the initiative. In today's story, Jesus lights a charcoal fire and puts some fish on it and then stands on the beach and calls to the disciples. We are not told where the fish and the bread come from. The disciples see him,

but, at first, they do not recognise him. We see this in a number of the recorded appearances, just as we often fail to recognise Jesus in opportunities to be a true neighbour.

Second, in every case, Jesus appears in response to human need. In today's story, the disciples had seen a tragic end to their mission; they had gone back to their old jobs, as fishermen. They had been out all night, but they had caught nothing. Maybe they had lost their old skills.

Third, in every case, Jesus' appearance changes the whole situation. In today's story Jesus tells them to try again, to cast their nets on the right side of the boat. And they catch so many fish that they cannot haul the net back into the boat. But there is more -- not only is the immediate need relieved, Jesus gives the disciples some vital life lessons.

You can discern this pattern in all the recorded appearances of the resurrected Jesus, even in the rather different experience of Paul, several years later. The story we heard today is recorded three times in the book of Acts. In a sense Paul's experience is not an 'appearance' at all -- Paul does not report that he had **seen** Jesus, he says only that he **heard** Jesus, speaking directly to him.

Again, the experience was unexpected, in this case, it was the last thing Paul expected, the last thing he wanted; yet, again, this was a response to Paul's pressing need -- Jesus revealed to him the truth he had been searching for all his life; and, again, it led to radical change -- as a result of this experience, Paul's life was turned around and the gospel began to be preached to Gentiles as well as to Jews, so that Christianity became a new religion, a faith for all races, not just another of the many sects of first-century Judaism.

We can see from the Scriptures that humankind's spiritual history has four distinct periods -- first, the age of expectation, when the chosen people of God awaited the coming of the Messiah, God's anointed; second, the age of sight, when the Messiah appeared on earth, and revealed the nature and the mind of God. He was rejected, because the Messiah the Jewish people saw was not the all-conquering hero many of them expected; third, the present age, the age of faith, which began at Jesus' ascension. Jesus is now free to appear to anyone, anywhere, at any time; and fourth, the age to come, the age of fulfilment, when God's purposes in Creation will be completed and Christ will reign in glory.

Our second reading today came from the book of Revelation, which is a vision of this **last** age, earth and heaven have become as one; Father, Son and Holy Spirit are acting in concert; and all humankind joins in singing with full voice -- *Worthy is the Lamb that was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and glory and honour and blessing.*

At Synod last year, each day's session was introduced by a study of the early chapters of the book of Revelation, given by Canon Stephen Gibson of Miranda. The studies are on the web and they relate the message of the book to today's human needs. Canon Gibson contrasts what he calls unreliable experience with reliable faith – in the age of sight, we often see things in context of the world's understanding of wisdom and power, in the age of faith we come to understand that God's plans for humankind are cross-shaped, that good will ultimately triumph over evil. As we recall every Easter, death is swallowed up by life, and defeat by victory.

So, during the Easter season especially, we are called to look forward to the age to come, as well as to look back and meditate on the events of the past. As we shall say later in this service, *Christ has died*, that is the past reality; *Christ is risen*, that is the present reality; *Christ will come again*, that is the future reality, when God's will will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Besides their common features, each of Jesus' appearances after his Resurrection has a particular significance. So, last week's story reminds us that Jesus cannot be shut out of any meeting of his disciples; today's story tells us about Jesus' being close at hand when we are at work, especially when things are not going well; the familiar story of Jesus' joining the two disciples on their walk to Emmaus reassures us that Jesus is always close by in our time of grief; and Paul's story is a reminder that our faith is a response to his initiative -- in a way that we do not fully understand and is more than we can describe by the theological label of 'predestination', our spiritual life is shaped by his will and develops according to His plan and purpose.

Today's story adds a critical dimension to the path of our salvation – a dimension so important that the gospel writer is compelled to reopen his scroll and add another chapter to his account. When they had finished breakfast, Jesus challenged Peter about love. All four gospels record that, during Jesus' interrogation by Pilate, Peter had denied him three times. From human weakness and from fear. When Jesus was arrested, all the other disciples had fled. Peter alone followed Jesus, but he kept his distance so he would not be identified as one of his followers.

From the courtyard, he watched Jesus being falsely accused, and insulted and beaten. He was afraid that Jesus would be executed, and he feared for his own life as well. Although he had slept while Jesus stayed awake and prayed in the Garden, he knew he did not have the strength to endure what he saw Jesus going through. Now, for each past denial, Jesus has a present and future question; *Do you love me more than these other disciples do?* That is, 'are you strong enough to lead them after I am gone?' Then, *Do you love me?* And again, *Do you love me? Yes! Yes! Yes! Then Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep.*

What needed to be added to the early story was the power of love; the love Jesus had spoken about so often: God's love for us, his followers' love for God, and their love for everyone, for

everyone in some way, is our neighbour – in Jesus' day, even the Pharisees, the Samaritans, the Romans, in our recent past, even the Germans, the Japanese and the Communists, and today, who? even Islamists, and drunken drivers, and anyone else we are afraid of or suspicious of. Love helps us to rise to every challenge, just as baking soda helps our cakes and biscuits to rise in the heat. So, this last chapter of the Gospel is telling us : yes, *Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have come to believe* , but you need to add love.

In the age of faith, we see Jesus only with the eye of faith, but we may hear His voice, as Paul did, in our times of loss or grief, or as we hear the Scripture read, or as we read it for ourselves, or as we pray, or as we minister to human need. We may hear his voice in the hymns we sing -- and we need to thank Deb and Lois and the members of the choir who are coming back this afternoon for our Seniors hymnfest. When you enrich our services here, you are doing something for us and for yourselves; when you come to lead the singing this afternoon, you are helping to confirm our faith and you may be helping someone who has drifted away from God to hear his voice again.

Being human, many people want to live in an age of sight; they want the kind of physical signs John writes about in his Gospel. So, when they pray, they expect their prayers answered, precisely -- *Heal my son, help me to pass my exam, bring peace to Syria, send rain on my crops*, or whatever. They give God a list of demands and they want them met. Now!. It is easy to forget that the prayers of those who love God involve more than asking him to help provide for our needs. They include simply adoring him for who He is, and confessing our sins, and accepting his forgiveness and thanking him for the gift of life and for so many other gifts.

In this kind of loving prayer, as we become aware of God in a deep and meaningful way, we shall be changed, and our situation will change, perhaps in ways we could never have imagined, just as the disciples in today's story could never have imagined, or Paul could never have imagined when he experienced Jesus on the road to Damascus.

Driven by love, Peter was given the strength to lead the Jesus' movement, and it became a new religion, a new understanding of the nature of God; driven by love, Christians throughout the ages have cared for the sick, comforted the dying and introduced millions to a new and abundant life. The black spots in the story have been times when hate has replaced love – like the Crusades and the Inquisition and McCarthyism in the 1950s, and church politics in every age.

As always, we need to link the Jesus story to the story of our own lives, and to listen for the voice of Jesus as we face our personal issues, and as we do what we can to minister to all those who are our neighbours. May we always be encouraged and strengthened by the words of the Lord: *Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have come to believe -- and to love.* Lord, hear us.