

Jesus Appears to Peter: John 21:1-19

A group of disciples, led by Peter, decided to return to the fishing boats they were so familiar with. At this point in their lives the disciples were completely confused about what was going on. They believed Jesus was the promised Messiah and followed Him in expectation that He would set up a kingdom over Rome. Instead of overthrowing Rome, He had been put to death by the Roman officials. Then with all their hopes gone they discovered that He was alive. The grave could not hold Him. But whatever that meant still seemed to elude them. And so, they decided to return to that which was most familiar, fishing.

Remember the call of Jesus to the disciples as they began their ministry. Three years earlier Jesus had asked these very same men to follow Him and declared then that He would make them fishers of men. Now they had returned, at least for a time, to fishing for fish and Jesus was going to re-direct them to the real assignment He had for them. They were to be fishing for men or reaching the world with the message that Jesus is alive and all who believe in Him might have life. John's gospel was written so that men and women might know the truth of who Jesus was and what He did and in knowing they might believe and have everlasting life (John 20:30, 31), BUT, that message has to be shared with the world.

The disciples had fished all night and caught nothing. At about dawn they were fishing close to shore since the water was shallow and they could control their nets easily there. Someone from shore asked how it had gone and they respond that they had caught nothing. This stranger, for they have not recognized him yet, told them to throw the net on the other side. The Greek is clear; Jesus commanded them to throw their nets on the other side. We are not told why they obey but presumably they assume that in the shallow water He was able to see what they could not, so they did as directed. One can only wonder when it dawned on them that what Jesus was really saying was that they had to re-direct their fishing. They had gone on their own, fished the way they had always done it and caught nothing. If they listened to Him and did as He directed there would be plenty of fish. What a powerful reminder this is to us as individuals committed to reaching out in Jesus' Name, and sharing the good news that He is alive. Doing it the way we always have instead of listening to Him may mean a lot of well-intentioned activity on the wrong side of the boat.

We read when they did as Jesus directed, they caught more fish than they could have imagined. In fact, there were so many that they could not handle them. Suddenly John recognized Jesus. We do not know why they did not earlier know who it was or what caused him to suddenly know Him. It could have gotten lighter. Perhaps the angle was better. Perhaps the miracle of such a great catch caused him to take a second look. But John saw it was Jesus and announced it to the others and the ever-impulsive Peter grabbed his outer garment, wrapped it around him and jumped in, heading for shore. The practice, especially in shallow water, was for someone to jump in after a school of fish were entrapped and wrap the net around them so they could haul them into the boat. That seems to have been Peter's task, but politeness would never permit him to greet Jesus that way.

Note that when the disciples arrived, they found a fire already lit and fish on it. Jesus had prepared a breakfast and what a meal that must have been. To begin with, that meal speaks of the provision that God has promised to all who do it His way, who obey Him. We are not told where He got the fish and bread from, but it was there and already prepared for His disciples. It must have been special but it was nothing compared to the wedding feast that Jesus will prepare for His church, a wedding feast that will be served when He returns.

What happened next is too often missed but significant. Jesus asked Peter to go and help bring the fish ashore. Jesus gave Peter the position of leader of the fishing crew and the responsibility of bringing the catch to shore. This was the same Peter who time and time again had blown it yet the one whom Jesus had consistently said God would use in the new kingdom, that is His church. Peter had not yet been restored to full fellowship that included ministry. That would come a bit later, but none-the-less he was given responsibility. How slow we sometimes are to forgive when our God is so anxious to restore. How prone we are to say, "Prove yourself first" and how quick Jesus is to say, "Get on with the work." Peter immediately did as commanded. Obedience is always important.

For some reason John included the exact number of fish. There were 153. We really have no idea why that number is given. Perhaps it was John's way of telling us that when we fish where God sends us, when we fish the way God tells us to there will be an abundance that few will believe, and none will be able to explain apart from God.

And the net was not torn. William Carey said, *"God's work done in God's way will never lack God's blessing."* Sometimes we wonder if we have the strength and resources to be what God wants us to be, do what God wants us to do or give what God commands us to give. But all who follow Him soon learn that when it is all said and done and the harvest is in, the net is not even torn. Had those disciples caught fish on the first side of the boat, doing it the way they always did, they would have then spent the next half day mending their nets. That was part of the job for fishers of fish but not of fishing for men.

Jesus was going to confront Peter about his love for Him but before that took place they would eat. The order is important to see. What an expression of love that was. There was a serious issue that had to be dealt with, but it was not so urgent that Peter could not first dry off, rest a bit, and fill his hungry stomach. That is not to say that the spiritual need was not, in the long run, more important than the physical, but it could wait. Jesus knew that caring for the physical would open the door to deal with the spiritual. Too often churches have insisted that since the soul is infinitely more important than the body that the soul has to be cared for first. Jesus continually recognized in His ministry the needs of the body and encouraged His followers to give a glass of cold water, a loaf of bread and a friendly visit in His name. For many the degree to which we are willing to concern ourselves with the physical is the degree to which they are willing to listen to what we have to say about the spiritual.

But there was a spiritual matter that had to be cared for and when the time was right Jesus dealt with it. The issue included a public declaration of his love of Jesus followed by an assignment that would be his and every follower of Jesus. Because He is alive, and has established His kingdom, we are to be His servants and feed His sheep.

This was not the first time Jesus had met with Peter following His resurrection. See Luke 24:34 and I Corinthians 15:5. The restoration of the relationship between Peter and Jesus was cared for the moment the two met on the resurrection day. This was a restoration of the ministry that Peter was going to have based on his public confession of his love for Jesus. Peter had denied Jesus in public and now, before others, he needed to make that right. Sins committed privately need to be confessed to God alone whereas sins committed publicly need to be acknowledged publicly.

The reason John included this incident is that the commission Peter was given is a commission for all who know that Jesus is alive, trust in Him for life and truly love Him.

Do you love Jesus today? Then feed His sheep.