

## **A sermon preached at the Old Royal Naval College Chapel, Greenwich**

*The third Sunday of Easter*

Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> April 2019

The Revd George Bush, Rector of St Mary-le-Bow

'Line caught fresh haddock with country-style Guinness-laden batter served on a bed of French mange tout accompanied by Pont Neuf potatoes'. In a pre-Jamie Oliver, pre-Gordon Ramsey age that would simply have been rendered as 'Fish and Chips'. There used to be a rather good fish and chip shop – Marie's – when I was vicar in Hoxton before Hoxton got posh. Arthur – who lived pretty much next door – enjoyed fish and chips so much that he had them for lunch and dinner and to say that 'he died of fish and chips' is a shorthand but not without a germ of truth.

Of course we are familiar with the health giving properties of fish and that it is both better for us and for the environment than meat of which we all probably eat too much. But whereas it was historically so cheap that it was rather despised and constituted what you ate only on a Friday as part of remembering that Jesus died on that day, or throughout Lent as part of the Lenten fast; nowadays fishing policies (intended to preserve stocks) mean that it is not super abundant and is rarely cheap. When a prawn comes all the way from Honduras you have to wonder whether it's quite what we need.

You heard it first here; when issues about the inclusion of women and issues about human sexuality have been laid to rest in the Church (don't hold your breath) the next issue to debate and divide will be the eating of meat or otherwise. There will be pescatarian parishes, vegan deaneries, carnivorous bishops, veggie archdeacons – you wait!

The economic conditions at the time of Jesus are not specifically described in the Gospels. We know that Joseph, usually thought to be a carpenter, may well have been a sort of master builder; but that in itself may suggest that as with others he – or his family – may have been driven from his own lands by financial ruin. There is an enormous amount in the Gospels and on the lips of Jesus about indebtedness and how to handle it; so plainly there was a lot of it about. It may well be that such were the exactions of the Romans and the Jewish priests, taxes on ordinary folk, that people ceased to be able to pay and many were driven into debt and forced to sell their land to make ends meet. This is not so far from our own day when 16 million of our fellow citizens have savings of less than £100 and personal debt constitutes 90% of what the nation actually produces.

A miraculous draught of fish would however speak rather more hopefully – for fish is pretty well always free and certainly would have been in the vast Sea of Galilee. Of course there are costs associated with boats, nets, labour and so forth; but as a harvest it is free. So a vast catch would come to poor people (perhaps wondering about their money lender) as pure blessing; unexpected and perhaps providential in feel – more than they felt their efforts deserved. For us it is perhaps a pointer to the fact that there is nothing that we have that we have not been given; everything assuredly is gift and not entitlement. It is sometimes easy for us to imagine that we can have a great deal and have God as well; whereas in fact God is always enough.

And 'fishing' is a central image that Jesus uses – along with sowing seed, to describe the way in which God, through his servants and disciples will draw in those who are to people his kingdom and his church. We are all to be fishers of people. Jesus, after the resurrection was understood as a fisher of souls and the Greek word (the language of the New Testament) ICHTHOS – FISH was an acrostic for 'Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Saviour'. St Clement of Alexandria in our second century sought to persuade Christians to use on their seals Christian rather than pagan symbols and principally, the fish, ship or dove. Christians were spoken of as fish because they were to see themselves as swimming always in the waters of baptism. The dolphins which form part of James 'Athenian' Stuart's decorative scheme for this chapel (where one might expect to see anchors) are fascinating and I have seen dolphins elsewhere nearby the font.

Elsewhere of course fish in not very abundant quantities is a key element in Jesus' miracle of feeding the five thousand – 2 fish and five loaves is all that the disciples can lay hands on when Jesus suggests that they should be responsible for the needs of all those who have turned up to listen to Him. And some grilled fish is what Jesus has to offer the disciples on the beach of the same lake when he appeared to them in today's Gospel after the Resurrection.

But we aren't saved by a fish; our redemption is not wrought in half a pound of skate; and the image only goes so far. This particular draught of fish is tempered with Resurrection hope and the Risen Christ appears in the midst of the toil of economic activity as if that was as special as anywhere else. But Peter, the one who denied Jesus (rather than the others in the boat who had merely run for their lives); Peter knew about the cross.

Could the Passion of Jesus have been accomplished with slightly less violence, just a degree or two less intensity of pain, some mitigation of the frankly lavatorial indignity and humiliation? Could a breach of his silence, some assertion of his innocence have assisted his cause or enabled us to understand his trial better. The answer is of course 'No'; strangely crucifixion, a tortuous method of execution reserved by the Romans for slaves who had betrayed their masters and for the heinous crimes of non-Romans – manages to plumb all the depths of agony and shame and so much so that the Romans themselves in succeeding centuries deemed it too brutal. So shaming was it in its effects on the naked body that Christians did not use the cross as a symbol for some centuries; preferring instead the image of a shepherd returning with a lost sheep over his shoulders. And of course the fish.

Just so – for in restoring Peter Jesus does not dwell on his innocence or his guilt, his part in the Cross; the test is not contrition or repentance but love. For the Resurrection is not a happy ending, still less some action by which goodness cancels out wickedness in some crude equation. The Resurrection means that we are treated no longer as if we are sinners but as if we are Jesus himself, by reason of love. God chooses no longer to see us in our compromise, collusion and guilt – he only sees as the same as Jesus who lived and died as do we. And at Easter he proves this by giving us Jesus back – the symbol of his trust; the one we killed, to be with us for ever. So let us swim like agile fish in the waters of baptism, the waters through which Jesus passed from death to life.