

Come and Have Breakfast - John 21

Breakfast, so the saying goes, is the most important meal of the day. I certainly have a great affection for breakfast food. The name, of course, implies its importance - it's a meal that breaks the fast of the nighttime, and prepares us for the day ahead.

The breakfast episode described in John 21 is one of my favourite stories. The question is: Why is this breakfast the most important breakfast of the gospels? What does it have to say to us about the Good News of Jesus?

We are told at the end of the gospel of John that Jesus 'did many other things' during his ministry, both pre- and post-resurrection, and so we are safe to assume that every story that is included has been chosen for a particular reason. The gospel seems to draw to a close naturally at the end of Chapter 20, so much so that many scholars refer to Chapter 21 as a kind of 'epilogue', a final flourish by the author to leave his readers with important, lingering thoughts. This humble breakfast on the beach, therefore, has been included for a reason. It is a story rich in meaning and significance, and was clearly intended to teach the early church something about what the Good News of Jesus' resurrection now means for them as a community of Christ-followers.

There is a very pleasing narrative unity to this story at the end of the gospel. The disciples come full circle, returning to the fishing grounds which set the scene for their first call, when Jesus had asked them to follow him, and 'fish for men' instead. Here we find the disciples, perhaps understandably, returning to the day job: these are the difficult days following Jesus' death. The disciples were laying low. They had encountered the risen Jesus, but were still, it seems, uncertain about their next steps. Pentecost had not yet happened; they had not received the 'helper' or 'comforter' who would guide and empower their next steps. It is understandable, therefore, that they would go back to the water, and see whether they could gather together some produce to sustain them during this difficult period.

The scene echoes with significance for the early church, and for us today. The disciples have pushed out into the dark waters, but their nets are empty. It was commonplace for fishermen at the time to prefer the nighttime to ply their trade, but the significance of the empty net is wonderfully symbolic: the disciples, it seems, cannot fill their nets alone; they need some help.

This story, therefore, is for any of us who feel that we are toiling in vain; that our nets are empty despite our labours. For those of us this week, or this year, or this decade, who have found ourselves adrift in a dark sea with seemingly nothing to show for our labours. Perhaps this morning you feel that your nets are spiritually empty. Perhaps you feel adrift in the nighttime. Perhaps you feel that you will struggle to drag anything of worth to the beach. If this describes your circumstance in any way, this story is for you.

This story is Good News because it shows how Jesus meets us in such circumstances, and how He guides us, how He fills us, and how He sustains us.

Firstly, he guides us. The disciples, all skilled and experienced fishermen, have had a night to forget. Verse 3 tells us that despite a full night's toil, they have caught nothing. I rather enjoy Jesus' question in Verse 5, 'Haven't you any fish?' He knows, of course, the answer to his question. Why is he asking? Is he mocking them? Does he have a smile on his face in this moment? Is he getting them to notice something so that they learn a deep truth in this moment that will carry them through the rest of their lives? The point here seems to be akin to his pronouncement that He alone is 'the way, the truth and the life'. Without Jesus our nets will forever remain empty. No matter how hard we try, how skilful our hands, and robust our equipment, our nets remain empty and devoid of purpose without Jesus there to guide us.

I love, too, the distance. He doesn't walk across the water to them like the story we heard last week. Nor is he asleep in the boat when the storm rages. Things have changed; he cannot be with them in that way anymore. Instead, he stands on the beach and calls out into the darkness, his voice carrying over the waves into the small boat. He speaks into their situation, and asks them to realise that, without his guidance, their nets will always be empty. He offers them a choice. He does not force himself in: he doesn't throw out the nets for them, or haul in the produce, or even

miraculously multiply fish like he has before. This time, he guides them to find another path. To follow His way. To listen to their master's voice. He says to them: follow me, hear my words, trust in my guidance and 'you will find some' fish.

Friends, if you feel that, this morning, you are sat alone in a dark boat, cast adrift in a barren sea, and that your hands are empty despite your best efforts, perhaps the Good News for you this morning is that there is another way. Jesus tells us that 'his yoke is easy and his burden is light'. He invites us this morning to hear his call, and cast out our nets on His side of the boat.

What does this story promise us if we follow his instruction. The outcome certainly isn't easy! In fact, the disciples find themselves with more fish than they can handle! Jesus does not promise us that His way will be easy, but he does promise that we 'may have life in all its fullness' (John 10) a gift that will be returned in full, 'pressed down, shaken together and running over' (Luke 6). The Good News of the gospel is the promise of an abundant life - a life full of blessing, and challenge. A fully human existence.

What I love about this image, too, is that the nets are so full that they must work together to haul it to the shore. What an image of the church in action! This is no private religion. We are in this boat together, and we will find our nets full if we choose to cast them deep enough. We are told that the poor will always be with us (Matthew 26), and that the widows and the orphans will always be in need of God's love. We have been invited into a mission of abundance - there is no shortage of fish - rather, the issue tends to be that whilst 'the harvest is plentiful, the labourers are few'. If we make the choice to cast our nets out, together, in the direction that Jesus points guides us, we will find our nets are quickly full! It is no easy life, but it is certainly more of a life than sitting in an empty boat, surrounded by dark seas.

And what is their reward for struggling this heavy net to shore? A fish breakfast! Jesus greets them with a reward in-keeping with the nature of their work. He blesses them with sustenance. Notice, too, that he invites them to contribute what they have caught to the barbecue. It's an invitation to contribute to the celebration, to partner with Jesus in both the work and the reward. I believe Jesus is teaching the disciples something here about the promise of life to come. It suggests, to me, that the things we do in this life in service of the Kingdom will somehow echo in the new Heaven and Earth. The fish we catch, the work we do, matters. Jesus invites you and me to partner with him in the work of his Kingdom - he chooses to work with us, to include us in his Kingdom project. This is the purpose of the Church. And Jesus promises to sustain us in this work - to set us up with a hearty breakfast, to feed us with his word, his presence, his spirit; to empower us with his mission, his guidance, to give us nets that will not break, even when stretched to bursting point. Jesus stands and waits for us on the beach, ready to give us rest.

Friends, this story has much to tell us about what it means to be a Christian, and what it means to be the Church. It is Good News: Jesus guides, fills and sustains us by his Spirit so that we might do immeasurably more with our lives than we could ever accomplish ourselves. We are invited, this morning, to join the great fishing expedition of His Kingdom, to take part in the work, together, and to ultimately land on the beach at the end of a night's work to have Jesus say to us: 'Come, and have breakfast.'