

“GOING TO GALILEE”

John 21:1-14

Jean Anouilh, the French writer, once said, “*Life is a wonderful thing to talk about, or to read about in history books – but it is terrible if one has to live it.*” And a little more recently, Nick Hornby, in his novel *About A Boy* said the following about life in the nineties: “*You didn’t have to have a life of your own any more; you could just peek over the garden fence at other people’s lives, as lived in the newspapers and Eastenders and films and exquisitely sad jazz or tough rap songs*”. He might have updated that in even more recent years by adding, “*or on Facebook or Instagram or TikTok or any other social media platform*”, where people build their fantasy lives or borrow from others. Now, they’re both saying what most of us know – our own day to day lives can often seem boring, routine, unfruitful – and that has been heightened for many of us by the last year’s routines of lockdown and lack of so many things that we once did but have had to put on hold.

Yes, we may well believe in Jesus and that he is risen from the dead. He has had some effect on our lives or we probably wouldn’t be tuning into this today, but for most of the time we can end up plodding along in our ordinary, humdrum, everyday activities, trying to make ends meet, trying to cope with the kids, trying to overcome the petty (or not so petty) frustrations that life throws up, trying to get through the next few days or weeks until there’s something special to look forward to, not least, at the moment, the easing of the restrictions we’ve been coping with for the past year.

For Peter and his friends, the disciples of Jesus, that was the kind of situation they seemed to be facing. They had seen Jesus since his resurrection – all except Thomas had seen him at least twice. They had followed the instructions they’d been given to go back up to Galilee where they would meet him again. But, in the end, when they got there, they’d just gone fishing, back to the things they used to do, back to the routine that was necessary if they were going to eat. And having set out onto the Sea of Tiberias, otherwise known as the Sea of Galilee, they had spent all night throwing out and hauling in their nets with absolutely nothing to show for it. It was a very ordinary, very frustrating situation. Life goes on.

But as they were drifting across the lake in the cool of the early morning, the milky sun shining through the wispy mist, they could make out a figure on the shore, who called out a greeting and asked if they’d caught anything. When they replied that they hadn’t, he suggested that they tried putting the net down on the right side of the boat. It’s more than possible that, even from a hundred yards away, someone on the shore could see evidence of a shoal of fish that wouldn’t be obvious to those immediately above it on the boat. The travel writer H V Morton, in his book *In The Steps Of The Master*, writes about fishermen on the lake of Galilee who relied on help from the shore to locate fish that were very close to the boat.

They follow the figure's advice and drop their nets where he says and when they try to pull the net in there are 153 fish in it – quite a catch! Whoever the eye-witness was whose account we have here – probably John himself – that number stuck in their mind as they counted up the catch to share out amongst themselves. But as the net fills with fish, one of the fishermen – again, John himself, it seems – cries out *“It's the Lord!”* The ordinary has become extraordinary. The frustration has disappeared. They realise that the risen Lord Jesus Christ has come on the scene.

Peter leaps into the water and strikes out for the shore, while the others follow in the boat and, as they haul it up the beach, there's Jesus with breakfast ready for them. He invites them to join him and they eat together. Sitting round the little charcoal fire, eating bread and fish in the pale early morning light, they all know it's Jesus, but can't bring themselves to confirm it with him. As we know from other accounts of the Easter story, there's something about Jesus that means that people don't immediately recognise him, but there's no doubt that it is him. He is there. **It's the Lord!** He has made the ordinary extraordinary for them. Their routine – the fishing trip they've done hundreds of times before – has been transformed. Their frustration has been overcome. It must have been a scene of some bewilderment, but also of great joy. You can imagine these fishermen whispering to one another over their bread and fish, *“It's the Lord!”*

It's the Lord! He makes the ordinary extraordinary by his presence. In the middle of the routine activities of our lives, in the long, dull periods of work and duty, during the times when we seem to be making no progress at all, Jesus is actually there. His presence is with us. We know that. We've read it in the Bible. We've sung about it in our hymns and songs. We've heard it proclaimed from the pulpit times without number. We've said “Amen” to it in countless prayers. We don't need to invite Jesus to be present with us: he's promised that he will be – and so he is. We believe in his resurrection. We assent to the creeds and go along with all the stuff about the Holy Spirit. But we need to say – to articulate with those first disciples – **“It's the Lord!”**, to acknowledge for ourselves that he's here and to receive from him.

With his presence, Jesus can make the ordinary extraordinary. He can bring a sense of purpose and meaning to our everyday situations. He is fully alive – a risen Lord and Saviour who is still active in his world through the presence of his Holy Spirit. And he wants us to be fully alive; to be aware of the possibilities that there are in each and every situation; to enable us to see each action, each word of our daily lives as a participation in him, in his life. There was nothing special about that meal that Cleopas and his companion shared at Emmaus. But Jesus' presence made it special. There was nothing special about going fishing on Galilee. But Jesus' presence made it special.

In chapter 10 of this Gospel, John records Jesus's words about himself as the Gate and the Good Shepherd. And in v10, Jesus says: *“I have come that they might have life, and might have it to the full.”* That's one

of the great themes of John's Gospel – Jesus comes to bring life: *“In him was life” (1:4): “I am the resurrection and the life” (11:25)*. Jesus wants us to enjoy life, to enjoy the things that occupy our time and our thoughts. He wants us to know the joy and freedom of his presence. Now, that doesn't mean that our situations are necessarily going to change. Acknowledging Jesus' presence doesn't lead immediately to wonderful new jobs or untold material riches, or even to mighty ministries of evangelism or healing or whatever. But it can lead to a renewed sense of joy, to a sense of fulfilment and satisfaction.

Let's just underline that and acknowledge the reality of this. The presence of Jesus doesn't always make the problems actually go away. It doesn't mean that life suddenly becomes a bowl of cherries. It doesn't take the difficulties out of life or magically transform illness into health, poverty into wealth, routine into constant excitement. The gospel is not the simplistic, Christianity-by-numbers that some people – whether the prosperity preachers or the die-hard legalists – would claim it is. Not all the people who saw Jesus after the resurrection became high-profile apostles, preachers and healers. Most went back to their homes and their jobs, but lived life with the amazing knowledge that they had seen Jesus and nothing was ever going to be the same again.

What I believe Jesus is saying to us today through this story is that our lives can be transformed from boring and frustrating routines by encountering him and acknowledging that encounter. How often do you stop during the day to say, **“It's the Lord!”**? How often do you pause in the tasks you're engaged in to remind yourself that Jesus is with you? When things don't go the way you want them to – like those fishless fishermen on Galilee – do you ever simply ask Jesus, who *is* there with you, to make himself known to you as you grapple with the issue?

Towards the end of the seventeenth century, a French monk known as Brother Lawrence wrote a series of letters and principles, which have been gathered together, along with the records of some of his conversations, as *The Practice of the Presence of God*. In it, he writes this:

“The most holy practice, the nearest to daily life and the most essential for the spiritual life, is the practice of the presence of God – that is, to find joy in his divine company and to make it a habit of life, speaking humbly and conversing lovingly with him at all times, every moment, without rule or restriction, above all at times of temptation, distress, dryness and revulsion, and even of faithlessness and sin. We should apply ourselves continually, so that, without exception, all our actions become small occasions of fellowship with God.”

That last phrase is really what I'm trying to get at today. The Risen Lord Jesus *is* there with you. He is alive and has promised to be with you at all times. His promises never fail: it's just that we don't always take him up on them. We don't pause to say to ourselves and to others, **“It's the Lord!”** We don't allow him to make the ordinary extraordinary by his presence. A while ago I had to do a bit of study of Celtic Christian spirituality and one of the great things I noticed is the way in which everything from milking the

cow and making a fire, to greeting a friend and sharing a meal is blessed with prayer, with a spoken acknowledgement that Jesus is present and active.

In a few moments we will be sharing together in communion and we will expect (I hope) to encounter Jesus through the prayers, the bread and the wine. But our encounters with him are not limited to such “spiritual” or “religious” occasions. Look out for him wherever you are, whatever you are doing, whatever time of day or night that it is. He’s there, if only you will look – even in the difficulties and uncertainties and confusion of these current times. And when you see him, even if you dare not ask him what he’s doing there, he will make a difference to your life. It will no longer be terrible to live your life, as Jean Anouilh claimed. You will not have to live it through fantasies and Facebook. Look. **It’s the Lord!**

For reflection and discussion

- 1) So many people view life as a struggle. Why do you think that is?
- 2) He’s unlikely to make us breakfast, but how do you think Jesus can transform our situations?
- 3) Share any occasions when you might have had an obvious encounter with Jesus. What difference did it make to you?
- 4) In what ways can we try to make *"all our actions become small occasions of fellowship with God"*?
- 5) How might you explain this to someone who doesn’t share your faith?