

A PILGRIMAGE WITH PETER TO JERUSALEM

Readings, Reflections and Prayers for use in Holy Week

Introduction

These meditations are based on extracts from “*The Chronicles of Petrus*”, a series of addresses in which I imagine gospel incidents as they may have been seen by the disciple, Simon Peter. I have in the past used them as whimsical sermons; as the basis for a monologue play; and, about five or six years ago, as part of an ordination retreat I led for candidates to be ordained at Petertide.

The sections offered here are set in the context of Jesus leading his disciples on his final journey to Jerusalem. Each is prefaced by a Bible reference for you to look up and read; and each concludes with a prayer. I offer them in the hope they might help us to reflect on the journey of discipleship even at a time when physical journeys are necessarily restricted.

With every blessing for Holy Week and Easter,

Charles Taylor

(The Very Rev'd Charles Taylor, Dean Emeritus of Peterborough)

I “You are the Christ”

Reading: Matthew 16:13-23

My goodness, what a rush it had all been! I don't think I've ever walked so far in so short a time. Jesus was certainly a man in a hurry. Within the space of a few months he'd healed a load of folk in Galilee, upset the Jewish elders in Capernaum, crossed the sea

several times, taught the crowds on the beach, in the fields, up in the hills, churning out parables as though they were going out of fashion.

It was like being caught up in a whirlwind. Literally, for there was a particularly scary moment when we were sailing to the country of the Gerasenes and a massive storm blew up. We were on the verge of capsizing but it didn't seem to bother him, asleep in the stern. We shook him awake, and you know what? He told us off. He said, "What are you fussing about, you quivering bunch of no-hopers?" Then he rebuked the storm as well and, holy fishing nets, it was immediately calm again.

Now that made us wonder, "Who is this, that even the wind and waves obey him?" And somewhere in the back of my little brain the idea began to form that maybe, maybe, this Jesus had pretty close links with the Lord of Creation. It wasn't so much a penny dropping as a ruddy great brick. I mean to say, it's easy when telling people about Jesus to slip into cuddly mode – "Loving shepherd of the sheep" and all that, like those cringe-making adverts in the church press for a minister "with a warm pastoral heart" – sounds like fresh offal on the butcher's slab or breakfast at a posh hotel: pan-fried liver, devilled kidneys and warm pastoral heart! We tend to forget that in my Palestinian days, pastors and shepherds, whether of sheep or of people, were expected to be leaders not nannies. More than that as far as Jesus himself was concerned. Not only a Good Shepherd, but Lord of Creation. And if that doesn't require us to follow, serve and worship him not casually and sloppily, but with a degree of awe and reverence, I don't know what does.

Anyway I was still mulling this over when we arrived at... well, picture for a moment a city, an important and historic city; the seat of kings for several hundred years; a political, administrative and financial hub with a significant worship-centre associated with royalty; and host to a huge games tournament lasting 20 days. So where do you have in mind? London certainly seems to fit the bill. Tokyo, perhaps. Beijing? New York? (whoops, sorry, no royalty).

Los Angeles? Hardly historic. Rome or Athens? Not too clever on the administrative and financial aspect.

No. The city I mean is Caesarea Philippi. It was an ancient Roman city located at the south-western base of Mount Hermon, often identified as the Mount of the Transfiguration. I'll tell you about that particular party another time. But actually, the city went back before the Roman occupation to the Greek empire. That's some two hundred or more years before Jesus came on the scene. The Ptolemaic kings built a cult centre there for the worship of the Greek god, Pan. Later, – about 20 years before my time – the Panion region, as it became known, was annexed to the Kingdom of Herod the Great, and a right royal bastard he was. He erected a temple there; and then, when I was a nipper, Philip II, also known as Philip the Tetrarch, refounded the city, which he later named Caesarea in honour of the Roman emperor, Augustus; and it eventually became incorporated into the province of Syria but with financial autonomy. I suppose that today you might call it “a unitary authority”. Jesus didn't actually take us disciples into the city itself – maybe he was concerned about what we might get up to at night – but we did come into the district of Caesarea Philippi.

So maybe you can begin to imagine our thoughts as we found ourselves close to this place where gods were worshipped, emperors honoured, their power administered and their wealth created. The regional governor of Judaea was based there, except when he had to go and calm things down in Jerusalem. In my time it was a chappy by the name of Pontius Pilate – you may have heard of him. It was against this background and in this awesome location that Jesus turned to us and said, in effect, “Well, here we are on the edge of Caesarea Philippi, monument to kings and emperors. Now, bearing that lot in mind, who do people say that I am?”

For a while, the others beat about the bush: “Some say John the Baptist, others one of the prophets.” So Jesus put the question directly, “Who do you say I am?” Now I have to admit, I've always had a problem engaging my brain before I open my mouth, but even

so I think I even surprised myself by blurting out, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” You are the Christos, the anointed king. Given the location, that was some confession!

Yet for once I appeared to have hit the nail on the head. “Very good”, said Jesus; “and I tell you, you are Peter the rock on which I’ll build my Church and I will give you the keys of the kingdom.” My, was I proud of myself? Me, old Peter, the rock of the Church and the keeper of the keys! I imagined myself standing at the pearly gates, keeping the kingdom secure. It was a long time – years later when I went to visit that Roman centurion, Cornelius – before I realised that the keys were not to secure the gates shut and keep the righteous safe inside, but to open the gates and release the kingdom of heaven out into the world!

Meanwhile, I was soon brought down to earth with a bump. Jesus started to talk about going up to Jerusalem to suffer and to die. WHAT? The Messiah, our great hope, walking into a death-trap? So I told him, I the rock and the key-holder, I stood up and told him: “Heaven forbid! You can’t do that.” He wasn’t pleased. In front of all the others he gave me a right telling-off. “Get behind me Satan!”

From the rock of the Church to Satan in a couple of minutes...that’s fast going indeed. So much for my keys. There was no way I was going to be able to lock him up, keep him to myself safe and sound. So I shut up. And that’s sometimes the best thing to do when, just as we think we’ve got the answer to everything, we find we haven’t really understood it after all: be silent, reflect and pray.

Prayer

Almighty God, you alone can bring order to our lives. Give us courage to change for better the things we can, grace to accept the things we can’t, and wisdom to know the difference. And grant that we may learn to love what you command and to desire what you promise; that among the many changes of this world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

2 Glory Be!

Reading: Mark 9:1-13

It's a pretty awesome mountain. Terrifying in fact if, like me, you don't have a head for heights. Give me the sea any day. Funny things may happen at sea, but nothing compared with what goes on up in the mountains. These were the traditional places of God's revelation; so when Jesus said to me, James and John, "Come on you three, we're going up there", I wasn't sure I was ready for it. Worse still, it dawned on me that it was six days since Jesus had last made a move. Six days – come on, you know – it's the time of purification before you come to the Holy of Holies! Lord, have mercy!

Well, you've heard the story, how Jesus was transfigured before our eyes, lit up like a Blackpool tram in October. My, was it bright! It was as though Jesus underwent a metamorphosis, a change of form – that's what transfiguration means by the way- as his normal human body was exchanged for the substance of heaven. And there were a couple of other guys standing with him, Moses and Elijah. How did I know it was them? Well, you can't mistake Moses – the Egyptian hair-do gives him away, not to mention the stone tablets under his arm. And Elijah? Camel's hair coat, leather belt, just like John the Baptist copied a few years back. But seriously, we knew, we just knew, take my word for it. Here before our eyes were the two representatives of the Law and the Prophets, expected to reappear to testify to the Christ when he came.

So you see, I was right, back there at Caesarea Philippi. He is the Christ. I couldn't wait to get back and tell the others. But hang on a minute. Why go back? Why not stay and enjoy the show? Better still, why not build three huts, tabernacles for Jesus, Moses and Elijah? Wall them in, keep them to ourselves. Of course, if we'd been Anglicans we would have built only two churches – one for us and the second so we could have one we didn't want to go to. But no, seriously, three tabernacles. Perfect.

But then came a thunderous voice, “This is my Son, my beloved. Listen to him”. Now where have you heard that before, “This is my Son, my beloved?” Yes, that’s right, at his baptism; but somewhere else as well. Let me think. Yes, of course, it pops up in one of those Royal Psalms. It was part of the coronation rite of the Kings of Israel – God’s chosen and beloved sons. Whoops, time to grovel. Scared out of our wits, we fell to our knees and shut our eyes. When we opened them again, the vision had vanished. But at least I was proved right. He is the Christ, the anointed one, the hope of glory.

But I was also proved wrong. It was not yet the time to stay and build tabernacles. The glory had still to be won; and it wasn’t going to be the glory of riding into Jerusalem with a victorious army as we first supposed. Instead, it was to be the glory of suffering love, and there’s no easy road to it. Rather it’s more a case of climbing mountains.

Come to think of it, he was crucified on top of a hill. And if you listen to clever, young Johnnie-boy, that’s where he discerns Christ’s glory. He doesn’t tell the story of the Transfiguration on Mount Hermon or, for that matter, the Mount of the Ascension. Rather, for John the hour of Jesus’s glory is when he climbs the hill of Calvary to ascend the throne of the cross.

As I said, mountains can be scary places and the call to discipleship and ministry doesn’t protect us from their challenges. We’ll often be confronted with them in different ways. There will at various times be mountains of work or heaps of problems; of despair as well as joy; of doubt as well as faith (remember, you can’t have one without the other); of failure as well as success; of anxiety as well as confidence.

In which case, we can do one of two things. We can either try and skirt round the mountain, and in so doing literally miss the point. Or we can hitch-up our loin cloths and go straight up to see the glory. And, strangely enough, often the best way to do that is to get down on our knees and shut our eyes.

Prayer

Almighty Father, whose Son was revealed in majesty before he suffered death upon the cross: give us grace to perceive his glory, that we may be strengthened to suffer with him and be changed into his likeness from glory to glory; who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

3 Feet and Service

Reading: John 13:1-17

So there we were in the Upper Room. Strange how we came across it. We were just wondering where we were going to eat the Passover – I mean, the restaurants are full in Jerusalem at Passover time and we hadn't booked in advance. Jesus said, "Funny you should mention that. Go into the city, take a right at the Caesar's Arms, second left at the Prophet and Scroll and bang on the first door you come to. The chappy will be expecting you." And so he was. Someone somewhere seemed to know exactly what was going on. I don't know whether you have had that sort of experience, but it gave me the creeps.

Anyway, we all met there. Adequate, but hardly the Hilton. There wasn't even a slave to wash your feet as we arrived. I was just commenting to Thomas that you can't get the servants these days when Jesus himself stood up, took off his cloak and put on the slave's towel, over his shoulder and right across his chest. It reminded me of someone – who was it now? It wasn't a slave. A deacon perhaps; but – yes, that's it – a judge. Have you ever been up before a judge? I was once for slapping a greedy tax collector with a wet fish. And the judge wears this sort of bandolier. I suppose it's a kind of symbol that justice, true justice, should be the deacon, the servant and not the tyrant of the people. But seeing Jesus like that made me uncomfortable. It was like facing my judge. Or my deacon!

And it got worse. You know what he did next. He took his towel and a bowl of water and actually started washing the feet of his guests. My dears, it was so embarrassing! There was our Lord and Master, head of the table - our supposed Messiah - there he was on his hands and knees splashing about in a bucket. People didn't know where to look. Some giggled awkwardly, others tutted in disgust.

Well, I knew what I, Peter, would do. I would put a stop to it. I wasn't going to have him washing my feet. You'd know what I mean if I took my sandals off at the best of times, let alone after the trek from Bethany through the dirty, effluent-soiled streets of Jerusalem. So I told him, "You will never wash my feet. I'm not having it." "Oh dear, Peter", he said, "Will you never learn? Fellowship is mutual service, and to serve another is to be in fellowship. If you don't let me serve you by washing our feet, then we can't belong together."

Game, set and match to Jesus. For the last thing I wanted to do was to disown him. So I came out with another of my blurted comments, "Then not my feet only, but my hands and head as well." He suggested that that was perhaps a little OTT.

Anyway, when he'd finished, he got dressed again and resumed his place at the top of the table. And he gave the first of two orders, two commandments, that night. Funnily enough, Jesus hardly gave any direct orders, you know. True, he left a hefty example for us to follow, but generally he wanted us to think things out for ourselves, to serve God not only with hearts but also with our minds. Faith is not the same thing as unquestioning obedience – that's just another form of slavery - and it's sad how some folk feel when they come into church that they have to park their brains outside the door. But Jesus only gave two direct orders. The first was this: "You see what I've done. If I, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you ought to do the same for one another. Love one another as I have loved you." I tell you, for the rest of that meal no-one needed to be asked twice to pass the salt. Everyone kept an eye open for his neighbour as we tucked into our lamb and bitter herbs.

Then, as we were eating, Jesus gave his second commandment. It was turning into a right *Mandatum*, or as you would say, Maundy Thursday. Jesus started the meal with the usual Jewish ritual, taking bread and giving thanks to God for his saving work in the history of Israel; he broke the bread and, as he passed it around, he said, “Take, eat; this is my body. DO THIS is remembrance of me.” Similarly, after supper with the cup of the Kingdom. He gave thanks and prayed for the fulfilment of our Messianic hopes; then he said, “Drink from this, all of you. This is my blood which is to be shed for you. Whenever you meet, DO THIS in memory of me.”

Do this. Why? We weren't quite sure why, not then. Even now it's hard to explain. In the end, you have to do it to understand. Because when you do it, when you take the bread and wine, break the bread and share the cup in his memory, you call him to mind; and it's as though he is made present, really present, in the midst of your celebration and sharing. You just know he's alive and there with you.

But all this talk of body and blood made us nervous. Judas left the room – I thought he was maybe feeling sick of all the talk of flesh and blood – and Jesus himself started to look troubled. We tried to jolly up the party and reassure him. In fact, that was the moment to say my bit: “Though all the others forsake you, Lord, I'll stand by you.” “Really, Peter?” he answered. “Well, we'll see about that. I tell you, before the cock crow this morning, you will have denied me three times.”

I tell you, I was not amused. I thought to myself, “We'll see about that.” So I said, “Though all the others forsake you, I will never deny you.” On reflection, I suppose it was a bit cocky, if you'll pardon the pun, to compare myself with the others. But, looking around the congregation, would you not have said the same? You won't deny him either, will you? Of course not. Oh, was that another pig I've just seen flying past the window?

Prayer

God our Father, we thank you for inviting us to share in the supper which your Son gave to his Church to proclaim his death until he comes; may he nourish us by his presence and unite us in love, service and loyalty to him; who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

4 Failure and Denial

Reading: Mark 14:32-50

Things ain't what they used to be. Ok, I'm getting on in years and I don't care if you think me an old fa...ther. But it's true that things ain't quite what they used to be. When I was called to be a disciple, Jesus just tapped me on the shoulder and said, "Follow me." It was much the same with my successors. The Bishop and the DDO or the Prime Minister and his Appointments' Secretary would sit down and choose a curate or incumbent, a dean or bishop over breakfast. Interregna were rather shorter in those days!

But things have changed since my time by the Sea of Galilee. No tap on the shoulder now. Rather a pile of application forms has to be filled in, personal statements have to be compiled to show how ambitious (sorry, qualified) you are for preferment, courses completed, boxes ticked. All in the name of transparency. Hmmm. Jelly-fish are transparent, but I don't think they would make good disciples. But then, I doubt if most of my companions would have made the grade either. Indeed, if you read the job description and applications forms for senior posts in the Church today, the only one of us who would have fitted the bill was Judas Iscariot. I wouldn't have got through a BAP.

But though we don't like to contemplate failure, coping with it, learning from, it is all part of growing in discipleship and ministry. And it came to me in a big way that Passover. First of all in the

Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus took me, James and John aside. And I thought to myself, “Here we go again – him and the three of us together, just like the Transfiguration.” Maybe the time had come at last, when the vision of glory would become a reality. The anticipation was heightened when he told us to be alert and be on guard. This was to be the moment for which we were called. Action at last!

So what did we do? We went to kip, fell asleep on our watch. Oh, the shame and disgrace of it. But at least I tried to make amends, if only in mitigation for the inevitable Court Martial. Jolted out of complacent sleep, I reached for my sword – Mark, Matthew and Luke don’t say it was me what did it; but John, who doesn’t miss a trick, he spotted me chopping the ear off the High Priest’s slave. It’s called “conflict management”; and I thought to myself, “That’s the way to do it!”

But once again, Jesus had other ideas, and rebuked me in much the same tone of voice as he used at Caesarea Philippi: “Get behind me, Satan. Put your sword back into its sheath. That’s NOT the way to do it!” So Judas and his cronies spirited Jesus away.

And yet, you might be gob-smacked to know, I actually feel quite sorry for Judas. Partly it’s a case of “there but for the grace of God” and all that. I wasn’t the only one who identified Jesus as the Christ, the long-hoped for Messiah of Israel. But if anything, Judas was even stronger in his expectations. He was, after all, a member of the Zealot party, eagerly watching and waiting for someone to take on the pagan Romans and show them who was boss. Jesus seemed to fit the revolutionary bill – signs, miracles, feeding the hungry, wowing the crowds, giving hope to the poor and downtrodden, healing the sick, proclaiming a new kingdom. The only draw-back was that he seemed to be something of a wishy-washy liberal pacifist, who declined to “dis-fellowship”, let alone stone adulterous women, dined with tax-collectors and sinners and healed the servants of gentile centurions. Meanwhile, the Roman oppression had gone on

long enough and things were getting desperate. How could Jesus be persuaded to act, to bring those evident miraculous powers to bear?

There was only one thing for it – back him into a corner, put him in a position where he had to fight. Stage a betrayal. But he didn't fight, did he? I did, but Jesus didn't. And to Judas's credit, when he saw that his little scheme had failed, that his Lord and Master, his hoped-for Messiah was condemned to death, he realised the error of his ways and returned the thirty pieces of silver. But he could not live with his failure. He could not see or accept any prospect of forgiveness, let alone redemption and a fresh start. So he went and hanged himself. And in terms of what Jesus stood for, that was the real betrayal.

Prayer

Almighty Father, look with mercy on us, your family, for whom your son was betrayed and given up to suffer death upon the cross; who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

5 Darkness and Death

Reading: Luke 22:54-62

Alright, alright! Yes I know I said I would never deny him. And in effect you made the same promise at your baptism or confirmation. You don't need to go on about it. I know I screwed up and, my God, I was sorry. I could have wept. In fact, I did. Bitterly.

Anyway, where were the others? They, too, fell asleep in the Garden of Gethsemane, didn't they? And when Judas came with those Temple Guards they all legged it, didn't they? Well, at least I put up a fight. It wasn't me who gave up, it was Jesus. He told me to stop.

But at least I followed him here, to the High Priest's House, which is more than anyone else did. And, yes, I denied him. I admit it. But what would you have said? I mean, there he was on trial for his life, and I was about to be exposed as an accomplice. So, go on then, what would you have said? Exactly. And that's what I said: "I don't know the man". And he heard me. It was awful. He turned and looked straight at me as cock-crow sounded. You can't begin to understand how terrible it was. You weren't even there!

But he was magnificent. They couldn't make him talk, you know. They tried all sorts of tricks and lies, beat him up. And when he did speak, it was only to tell that which he could never deny: "I am" he said, repeating the Name of God; "I am; and you will see me sitting at the right hand of power, coming in the clouds of heaven."

Well, that shook them. If you asked me, they were more frightened than he was as they screeched in horror, "Blasphemy, blasphemy! Put him to death!" And so Caiaphas won his case – and yet lost it that very moment. For what sort of a god needs that sort of protection from human beings? If he has to rely on blasphemy and heresy laws and death penalties in a human court, you wonder if he's worth worshipping. Anyway, there was still nothing they could do by themselves. They had no power to execute their sentence and so, for all their high principles, they had to go crawling to the Roman Governor.

At first, he – Pontius Pilate – didn't seem all that interested. "Oh, take him and judge him yourselves", he said. Yet he too was forced to act. "If you release this man you are not Caesar's friend." That was tricky. Old Tiberius Caesar may have been far away, but he always scrutinised reports from the provinces; and any governor who did not lace the reports with sufficient flattery would be out of a job, dismissed with one word - *friget* – he's cold. And if the failure to suck up was interpreted as hostility, then he'd literally be cold, dead meat. The accusation that Pilate was not Caesar's friend was a real and clever threat.

Yet Pilate was no fool either, and he turned the crisis into an opportunity. “Shall I crucify your king?” he asked. “We have no king but Caesar.” Got them in one! No governor had ever done it before; no foreign power in Jerusalem had ever extracted such a pledge of loyalty from the leaders of the Jews. The Chief Priests might have got what they wanted, but they paid the price of total apostasy.

Yet Pilate also paid a price for winning himself a place in history. For even now the voices of the faithful recall his name week after week: “*Crucifixus etiam pro nobis sub Pontio Pilato*” – crucified for us under Pontius Pilate. It echoes day by day across the whole of Christendom: “crucified under Pontius Pilate.” He won his place in history, but I’m not sure it’s the one he had in mind at the time.

No, if you ask me, there was only one man in control that day, only one who was not forced into shifting his ground or betraying his principles: Jesus. Like a referee at a boxing match, he stood there in the middle while Pilate and the Chief Priests fought it out. And when they’d finished, they dragged him off to Golgotha.

I didn’t follow this time. Nothing I could do would save him now, and I just couldn’t face it. It wasn’t just the blood, the guts, the smell and the screaming. More the guilt. OK, we could have blamed Judas, or the Chief Priests, or Pilate, or the fickle crowd. But who are we kidding? Oh, if only we’d stayed alert in Gethsemane; if only I’d fought harder; if only I’d stood up for him instead of denying him, or shouted for him when everyone else was shouting for Barabbas; if only I’d had the chance to say sorry...but it was too late.

So I sloped off back to the lodgings in despair. Suddenly I found myself getting angry, very angry. With Jesus. Why had he left us in the lurch? Why didn’t he listen to me at Caesarea Philippi when I told him not to go to Jerusalem? He must have known what would happen.

And then a terrible thought struck me. What if he really did know. What if he was right? What if he did rise again on the third day as he said? Oh my God, I wasn't sure I could cope with that - with looking him in the face again. I mean, could you if you had failed, forsaken and denied him? What excuse could I give. If only....if only... If only what?

Prayer

Forgive us, O God, for the many times we have denied Jesus, forsaken his way or mistrusted his love. Have mercy on us and on all who struggle with fear and despair, or with the anger and guilt of grief; and bring us to know the peace, light and joy of the resurrection which you have promised us in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

6 Resurrection

Reading: John 20:1-10

They took his battered body and buried it just before sunset on Friday. But there was no time to clean him up or embalm him, no time for last respects. With night-fall came the Sabbath, the longest Sabbath I can remember.

One by one we crept back to the Upper Room. None of us really wanted to talk, least of all me. I just stayed in my corner, alone with my grief and my guilt. The only sound was the weeping of the women as they wittered on about anointing the corpse. What difference would it make? I wished they'd shut up. But, come the first sign of dawn, I was glad when they went out to get on with it. Peace at last.

Through the attic window we watched the dawn break. The birds, so strangely silent over the last couple of days, were singing again. It

wasn't safe to go out just yet, but come evening we could slink out the city unseen and head back to Galilee, back to the fishing boats. Well, what else was there left to do?

Then, suddenly, running footsteps. The women were coming back in a hurry. Who was chasing them? Stupid fools, they'll give us away. Quick, let them in and bolt the door! And they told their story:

Apparently, they'd got to the cemetery with their spices when they realised they should have brought a few men along to move the great stone. What could they do? They would have to risk it and ask one of the guards for help. But where were they?

There they were, asleep round their fire. Gently, for fear of alarming them, gently they touched one of the guards on the shoulder. He didn't respond. They shook him harder, and he started muttering in his sleep, something about an earthquake...fire...a rushing mighty wind. Then one of the girls saw it. "Look", she squealed, "look at the tomb. It's open." They scuttled over and peered inside. "Empty" they said. "What do you mean, empty?" I asked. "Well...empty. The body's not there. They've taken it away." In a flash, my grief turned from self-pity to anger. I was so furious. The dirty, rotten so-and-so's. Even now they couldn't leave him in peace. "Come on", I said to John, let's go and sort this out."

Oblivious now to the risk, we shot out of the door and ran to the cemetery as fast as we could – which in my case was not that fast. John though is a lot younger than I, and he got there first. When I finally lumbered up, puffing and panting, John was dithering outside the tomb. So I pushed him out of the way and charged right in. He followed...and for a moment we were both lost for words. The women were right. The body wasn't there – just the head-band and the blood-stained shroud. Funny, I thought; if they wanted to take the body away and hide it from us, why did they bother to take these off first?

It was John who twigged it. “Peter”, he said softly, think. Use that little fisherman’s brain of yours. Think what he said, “The Son of Man is destined to be put to death – and to be raised up on the third day.” “Oh no” I said, “no, it can’t be true. Oh my Lord, what are we going to do?” John shrugged his shoulders. “Go back and tell the others, I suppose.” “O come on,” I said, “they’ll never believe us.

I guess I wasn’t sure whether I wanted to believe it myself. I had a strong suspicion that John might be right – it was the only conclusion which made sense of everything we had heard and seen in Galilee by the sea, up in the mountains and down here in Jerusalem. It made sense. But I didn’t want to believe it, not at first. For a start, it made me look so stupid, so stubborn, so faithless. It was hard enough to think I’d denied my friend. To realise I’d forsaken my Lord and my God was just too much!

I mean, supposing he was to appear, suppose we met up again, what on earth could I say? More to the point, what would he say? No, I can’t blame those who find it hard to believe, because it means facing the truth not only about Jesus, but about yourself; and that can be painful. Apart from anything else, it punctures our pride and the illusion of self-sufficiency. And we don’t like that. We like to think of ourselves as independent, strong, capable of looking after number one; whereas to believe and trust in God makes us seem like weak cissies. But I tell you, from my experience of that week, it takes far greater courage to believe than to deny. It’s far tougher facing up to the truth than refusing to admit it.

And yet when you do face up to it, what a relief and joy it becomes. All that weight of anger, grief and guilt, all that is simply lifted off your shoulders. And as we walked back to the city, the sun rose higher in the east behind us, warming our backs and our hearts. It wasn’t the end of the story after all. It wasn’t all over. In fact, it was only just beginning.

Prayer

Lord of all life and power, who through the mighty resurrection of your Son overcame the old order of sin and death to make all things new in him; grant that we, being dead to sin and alive to you in Jesus Christ, may reign with him in glory. To him with you and the Holy Spirit be praise and honour, glory and might, now and in all eternity.

7 Renewal

Reading: John 21:1-19

As I said, it wasn't all over. It was only just beginning. So we found ourselves back at the beginning, at the water's edge where it all started. Funny how water keeps coming into the story – at the river Jordan, water into wine at Cana, the calming of the storm, walking on the water. And once more, it was from the water that he called me again.

You see, after all the fuss died down in Jerusalem, some of us decided to go back to Galilee and start fishing again. After all, what else could we do? But somehow we'd lost the knack. That night we caught nothing. Tired and frustrated we turned back towards the shore. In the half-light of dawn we could just make out this figure on the beach, waving and shouting at us. Eventually, we worked out what he was on about. He was signalling to us to cast the net on the other side of the boat. Maybe from where he was he could see something we couldn't – like the ripple of a shoal in the water. So we did what he suggested and, blow me, the biggest net-load we've ever caught. So big we couldn't heave it on board.

Suddenly it clicked. It was him! And I did the most stupid thing. I put all my clothes back on and jumped into the sea. Would have made more sense if I'd stripped off completely, and certainly would have made swimming a lot easier. My mates always said I was a daft

old brush, but something inside me told me I didn't want to appear naked, vulnerable, before my risen Lord. Not a pretty sight!

Not that I could hide anything from him. I sensed what he was up to when I scrambled ashore and saw that he'd lit a charcoal fire. Now when was the last time I saw him through the shimmering heat of a brazier? Quite so – in the courtyard of the High Priest. Déjà vu! Still, he was busy cooking breakfast – bread and fish. Not the first time he'd done that, either! But, when we'd finished eating, he started on me: “Simon loanou, agapas me pleon touton?” “Simon,, son of John, do you love me more than this lot?”

Oh dear. Once I may have said yes with confidence; but now I was in no position either to compare myself with the others or to compare my love for Jesus with my fondness for my mates. What's more, Jesus used that very strong, deep word for love, “agapas”. Well, you don't need me to teach you your Greek. “Agapas me”...agapas....do you love me with that deep divine love beyond words? Well, this time I was determined not to boast; so leaving the others out of the equation, I simply said, “phileo se”...yes Lord, you know I'm your friend.

Not satisfied, he tried again. This time he also left out mention of the others and asked the straight question. “agapas me” – do you love me? And once more, I replied weakly, “phileo se” – you know I'm your friend.

I hoped he might leave it at that, but no. He persisted, and this time I got really quite upset. Not because he kept repeating the question, but because he kept changing it, bringing it down to my level. The third time he didn't ask “agapas me” but “phileis me”; as though to say, OK, you can't claim to love me deeply; but are you sure you can even claim to be my friend?” And that hurt. What would you have said? I didn't know what I thought and, in the end, could only rely on his knowledge of me: “Lord, you know everything; you know I'm your friend.” And in response, he commissioned me to feed his

lambs and tend his sheep. It was in breaking me down that he restored and released me for ministry.

Restored, renewed and released – and yet captured. Because he warned me, there and then, that one day someone would bind me and take me where I do not wish to go. Yet somehow that doesn't seem to bother me any more. For everything that's happened since bears out the truth of what he said to us that day at Caesarea Philippi – you remember, the day he gave me the keys to the kingdom – when he said, “Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake and the sake of the gospel will find their life.”

And what a life it's been. I think you'll also find there's never a dull moment. Yes, there'll be low points as well as high points, not to mention turning points. But never a dull moment. Take the Day of Pentecost for a start. There we were, huddled again in that Upper Room, when the whole house began to shake like an earthquake and each of us thought the others' hair had caught light. We shot out of that place like a rabbit from a burrow with a ferret up its backside; and before we knew what we were saying we found ourselves preaching in every language under the sun. Talk about being released! All of which caused another great stir in Jerusalem, much to the consternation of the authorities who had Stephen stoned to death and James executed with the sword. That's when I got flung into prison for the first time, if you remember.

And now here I am, once again a prisoner, probably for the last time. Even if they don't crucify me, I'm too old to survive much longer on this earth; old and ready to sleep in Christ. Mind you, I could murder a drink and the bar should soon be open. But thanks for listening to me. Oh, and one more thing: as you take over where I leave off, do your best always to follow him through thick and thin - just as you promised when he called you at the water.

Let us pray.

*God grant that we and all who have been baptised into the death of Christ may, by putting to death our corrupt desires, be buried with him; and so through the grave and gate of death may pass to our joyful resurrection.
Amen*