**Sermon for SJB and SSC May 1st 2022 Easter 3**

One of the many highlights of a pilgrimage to the Holyland is a visit to a particular location by the Sea of Galilee. There you find a simple little church with an ancient mosaic of loaves and fishes and a small pebbly beach. It’s a beautiful spot where pilgrims are invited to spend some time in quiet reflection after reading the story we’ve just heard here today. Whether or not it happened at this exact place or another similar one on the shores of this beautiful inland sea, it brings the story vividly to life. Standing on the beach looking out to sea it’s easy to imagine Jesus here, preparing a simple barbecue.... Peter’s boat in the distance bobbing on the waves.... the weary friends despondently contemplating their empty nets after a failed night’s fishing...hear Jesus calling across the water, knowing their problem and giving them fresh hope... see their excited faces as they haul in a great catch... hear John’s great shout of realisation: “It is the Lord”...see Peter grab something to cover himself and tie it round him, flinging himself into the water, desperate to reach Jesus, the others coming ashore after him with the net full of fish....hear that lovely invitation, “Come and have breakfast” and know somehow in your heart that you’re invited to share in it.

Bread and fish, basic food, reminding us of the little boy’s picnic offered to Jesus to feed a great crowd. After breakfast when weary bodies are revived we’re reminded of another time when people were warming themselves by a fire out of doors. ..the night before the crucifixion when Peter denied even knowing Jesus, not once but **three times.** Now, by the fire on the beach, Jesus asks Peter **three times**, “Do you love me?”

This is clearly very painful for Peter, but absolutely necessary to prepare him to “feed my lambs, tend my sheep”, that is to take on the awesome task of leading the first followers of Jesus after the ascension...leading them in the power of the Holy Spirit to spread the good news of Jesus’s resurrection and all that means for those who will come after....right down to us here today.

After the great spiritual highs of seeing the risen Jesus in the upper room in Jerusalem, there seems to have been a time of waiting, maybe of uncertainty too. Yes, Jesus was certainly raised, but he didn’t come back and stay with them all the time as he had in the previous three years. Yes, he was recognisable, but somehow different as well- -appearing and disappearing in most unexpected ways. The disciples, left rather in limbo, had finally left Jerusalem and gone north, back home to Galilee. Matthew tells us that Jesus had actually directed them to go there and wait for him and of course that’s where they would have felt much safer.

Feeling at a loose end and being a man of action, Peter had gone back to his old life, his own boat where he felt in control, and taken some of the others with him. However, when Jesus appeared again, transforming Peter’s useless labours into a glorious catch and finally absolving him from his betrayal, he was ready to leave it all...this time for good.

Huge lessons had been learned by Peter since Jesus had first given him his wonderful new name, Peter the rock. He’d had to ditch his preconceived ideas about how the lord’s messiah should behave, totally lose all his pride, even allowing his lord to wash his feet, recognise, weeping bitterly, his own weakness as he denied even knowing Jesus, and finally come to a new depth of repentance. Only then was he ready to receive complete forgiveness and recommissioning.

Only then was he ready to become the first great Christian leader and preacher, not in his own strength alone, but in the power of the Holy Spirit after Pentecost.

One of the great historians of the early church by the name of Eusebius records that Peter was finally crucified in Rome. This was the meaning of Jesus’s prophetic words: “When you grow old you will stretch out your hands and someone else will fasten a belt round you and take you where you do not wish to go”. “

After all of this momentous stuff, “Follow me” is still the simple command to Peter, and to all of us. Being a Christian is not primarily about believing a whole set of seemingly impossible things before breakfast. It’s about following a person.

In Peter’s journey of faith we can see a pattern for ourselves. Our weaknesses, like Peter’s, can be transformed into opportunities to learn and grow, if we are willing. God doesn’t wait until we are fully formed and ready for anything. He calls us constantly in all kinds of ways, through the scriptures, through the words and examples of others and through the circumstances of our own lives. He calls us to let go and follow him. We might even experience something dramatic like Paul in our first reading. More likely we’ll be called in more mundane ways. But the calling is always to follow Christ right where we are. That means to live out the values of his kingdom in word and deed, to grow in the fruit of the spirit- -as Paul writes in his letter to the new Christians in Galatia- - “the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control”. Whenever we respond and open up to God he can work on us. When we stray away and want to be in total control ourselves, he waits. When we return he’s ready to forgive, to restore, and to offer us new challenges.... just as he did with Peter and Paul.

Pride, fear, jealousy, all of these and more can block the path on our journey of faith.

The way forward is the way of constant repentance and forgiveness. These can be very costly and take time and effort. I can vouch for that in my own life. But they are crucial

Our supreme example of forgiveness is of course Jesus, the human face of God himself. As he hung in agony on the cross he said those amazing words, “father forgive them, they know not what they do”.

It’s a very personal business. Sometimes the pain inflicted by others may be just too great, the hurt and damage caused seemingly impossible to deal with. Then we may need to seek serious help. If after all of that we still find we genuinely can’t forgive, we should neither neither beat ourselves up nor allow ourselves to dwell on it and let it poison our lives.

It is enough to bring the whole situation before God and leave it with him, knowing that He understands .From my own experience after a very painful divorce very many years ago, when for a long time forgiveness seemed impossible, by finally letting go and leaving it very deliberately with God, I have discovered that he can bring final healing. Rest assured, however long it takes, if we give it all to him and leave it there, whether this side of the grave or beyond, final healing will come.

Wherever we are on our own journeys with all of this today, let’s take heart from the stories of Peter and Paul....stay close and do our best to follow Christ, moving on with him, day by day, in faith and hope and trust.

For alleluia, Christ is risen!

He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

*Carole Lewis*