

Easter 3

After any significant event in our lives, or in the nation, we want to know, “what happens next?” Our marriage, the diagnosis of an illness, the first day on the new job, or there is a new Prime Minister or Moderator or even Pope. What happens next?

What happens next after he who was crucified is no longer dead but alive?

Today’s reading from John’s gospel is about what happens next; and indeed how we are to live a Christian life.

Now John 21 is like an epilogue or postscript to what could be seen as a complete story. Last Sunday the reading from John 20 was about Easter and it seemed to bring neatly the whole of the gospel to a close. In fact there were these two verses which close off rather nicely the whole of the story of Jesus as told by John:

“Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.” (Jn 20:30-31)

Perhaps Chapter 21 is just tacked on by another author, or perhaps it was John himself with an idea that it form a postscript to the story of Jesus as the Christ – we do not know. However, it is clear that it opens up for us, at least with the perspective of the community of John what happens next after all that happened at Easter.

So what happens? There are several twists and turns.

To begin with Peter utters one of the most memorable lines of all the accounts of Easter, perhaps of all scripture:

“I am going fishing”

After all of the drama, stress, anxiety, fear, shock, excitement, joy and amazement of the previous days Peter cuts to the everyday realities of life and announces “I am going fishing”. True this was not a recreational trip down to the lake to unwind. Fishing was after all his job. And as the introduction to this chapter indicates he is now back home by the Sea of Galilee with the other fishermen. What happens next, is that even if he doesn’t stay as a fisherman, he still wants to get on with life. And at that stage fishing was what he did, and so that is what he does here.

So whatever the risen, crucified Christ might mean, it certainly does not mean one stays at a point of wonder or contemplation. These Easter events have to mean something in your everyday life. Peter perhaps learnt something from the Transfiguration. Remember after his mountain top experience in which Christ was transfigured, shone brightly, Peter and the others wanted to build a booth, a memorial for the occasion. Jesus however, promptly brought them down off the mountain to resume his teaching and healing ministry. Our faith is to come through in our everyday life, and not just be on the mountaintop, or in Jerusalem, or at an empty tomb all the time.

Unfortunately Peter’s fishing was a disaster. He and the others didn’t catch a thing. After these years of following the master, perhaps he had lost the knack. Going back to the old trade was perhaps not

a good idea. Whatever. He just didn't catch any fish. And so what follows can only be described as a miracle; indeed a miracle not unlike they previously had experienced with Jesus when he was alive. Jesus then performed miracles – true miracles with which our modern minds may have difficulty - but what happens next, when all the excitement of Easter dies down, is that miracles continue. Here is some tangible continuity between what happened in the time of Jesus, and what happens subsequently. However, I perhaps jump ahead a little with regard to this miracle of the huge draft of fish, because we need first to note the sequence of events.

We are told that they were fishing close to the shore but they did not know that the character on the shore was Jesus. Yet this person, Jesus, enquires as to how they are going – he indeed he seems to know that that they have not caught anything. And the fishermen confirm that this is the case. Jesus then gives the instruction, a command?, to cast their nets on the other side. They do this, and they catch a great number of fish. At that point they recognise this is the Lord – and they still are 100 metres or so off the shore to actually see, and positively identify him.

Conclusion? Well unlike the other immediate post resurrection encounters when followers had problems trying to piece together what was happening, this seems to be different. With Mary Magdalene, the two on the road to Emmaus and even earlier on Easter night in John's gospel – there is a specific scene of disclosure: the breaking of bread, showing the wounds, or a direct personal address "Mary!" The persons then believe. But what happens here is that the disciples respond to Jesus before they actually meet him or definitely know who he is. Remember he is a 100 metres away and "Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus." What is critical is the command, and explicitly following that direction – and the fish are caught. Obedience precedes recognition. In the obedience, the disciples discover that it is the Lord. They piece it together at that point.

What happens next – well, it is not merely believing and asserting Jesus is the Lord first; it is following a command; a command which soon adds the simple words: follow me. Albert Schweitzer so eloquently makes this point in the conclusion to his famous *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (1910; New York: Macmillan Co., 1961, p. 403):

"He comes to us as one unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lake-side, he came to those men who knew him not. He speaks to us the same word: "Follow thou me!" and sets us to the tasks which he has to fulfil for our time. He commands. And to those who obey him, whether they be wise or simple, he will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they will pass through in his fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience who he is."

We learn through doing, through living, through loving, through following. Jesus is revealed as we live life in this way.

And if that is not enough, the simple meal they then share beside the sea. . . . true a meal which involved fish and not wine but all the same still has strong echoes of the last supper, or that meal at Emmaus and of course the meal which we will again celebrate today.

But finally there is the scene with Peter - which also becomes a critical aspect of what happens next. . . . you might call it the organisational dimension, the leadership question as to the next step. How do Christ's followers get organised? Well, there is at least from this account (and from Acts the story of Paul) people who have been given a particular calling among the group.

Now for some Christians this is the text, along with that passage in Matthew in which Christ says to Peter you are the rock on which I build my church, we have the biblical warrant to have a direct line to Pope Francis; the inheritor of the so call Petrine ministry. I think on any reading of the text one is making a lot of leaps to get to the point of saying that all authority is given to the present day Pope. But having said that, what happens next is that for the followers of Jesus is that after his death people will be called to have specific roles.

Here Peter's call begins with the simple question of whether he loves the risen Lord. Not an unreasonable question given that in the heat of the moment during the arrest of Jesus Peter, despite his protestations to the contrary, three times ends up denying Jesus. And three times he is asked if he loved the Lord. It in fact is recorded the Peter gets a bit tetchy at Christ's persistence to ask three times. Perhaps it was a little close to the bone. But in what happens next after Easter – people are needed who are committed, who will not drift off, who indeed love the Lord. And those who are called and they may even have a checkered history of commitment.

There is indeed this intriguing verse

“Very truly I tell you when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.”

At one level it is a salutary commentary on growing old. Independence can decline; we will be helped and by those who love us. In youth we are impetuous – no one can tell us what to do. But life does change – and we need the care of others so that we might still live life to the full. However, this statement relates to the kind of death Peter will die. Now Peter is thought to have been martyred – which does not seem to have much to do with other people putting your belt on in old age. But then, as a martyr one's destiny is not determined by what you think is important for you. You are taken where you do not want to go. You naturally would want to avoid a cruel death if you could; but for the sake of Christ who guides you and gives you life – you follow and no longer you deny you are one of his.

In what happens next, people will be challenged to follow, even to the point of death. But they will be given a task. Peter's task was to “feed the lambs” or “tend the sheep” - a clear pastoral task with strong echoes of what the good shepherd himself would do. Don't worry the details: Christ simply says “follow me” and we follow.

So what happens next:

1. Life continues – we go fishing.
2. We come to understand the unknown and mysterious Christ, in doing, in following the commands, in loving others as ourselves, in following.
3. Expect the unexpected. You could just do things a little differently like casting out on the other side. But miracles, the unexpected can happen.
4. Recall and confirm the crucified, risen Christ in the meal we will soon share.
5. And perhaps above all, be prepared to follow – knowing, that like in old age when others out of love do things for you, you actually have the assurance you will be profoundly loved - even to the point of death.

What happens next? Well the life, the love and the hope of Christ lives on in his followers.