

5 May 2019

John 21.1-19

Acts 9.1-6

Transforming Encounters

This past week Sally and I have been in Sorrento in Italy.

I have wanted to go to that part of Italy for some time ... partly because I wanted to visit Pompeii.

Pompeii sits at the foot of the volcano, Vesuvius. The magnificent Roman city was totally destroyed by a volcanic eruption in 79AD. The city was buried under 4 to 6 metres of volcanic ash, and remained largely undisturbed until its ruins were discovered in the 18th century. It was archaeologists in the 19th century who began to uncover the full extent of the ancient city, and found a city buried in time, but also preserved in time.

Some of the most striking finds the archaeologists discovered were some voids where human bodies had been. Over the years the bodies had decayed. These voids were filled with plaster, making striking casts of bodies caught in the moment of catastrophe.

The striking thing about the ruins of Pompeii is that it is a city caught in a moment of time ... and also a city that will forever be known and remembered for its catastrophic demise.

It is a city defined by its past ... and one moment of its past.

There are times when we can feel that we are forever defined by our past. Some events in our past – past choices, past actions, past events – feel that they are somehow set in stone and will forever shape and define who we are now.

Our readings this morning have introduced us to three encounters with the risen Jesus. Three transforming encounters, in which those who meet Jesus discover that the past need not always define them. Their lives can be transformed, and set free of the past. Their lives and their destinies are not set in stone.

Firstly the miraculous catch of fish.

You might want to ask what the disciples were doing. It's almost as if they found themselves at something of a loose end. They didn't really know what to do with themselves.

They had already met the risen Jesus in the upper room – most of them on two occasions.

On the first occasion Jesus had breathed on them and said "Receive the Holy Spirit. As the Father has sent me, I am sending you."

On the second occasion, when Thomas had been with them, he had made the remarkable declaration, "My Lord and my God!"

You'd have thought they would have been stoked up and ready for action. Instead, it's as if they don't really know what to do with this amazing news. They are paralysed ... and so they revert to their old way of life. Back to Galilee, and back to the fishing ...

And what seems to be a good idea turns rather sour ... because it seems as if these experienced fishermen had somehow lost the knack. What once came as second nature, no longer did.

They had a thoroughly disappointing and dispiriting time. Hoping to get some of the old 'buzz' back that came from pulling in a good haul of fish, they found themselves at the end of the night more down than when they had set off from shore.

Until the mysterious figure on the shore-line turned up, with his cheerful but amateur advice.

"Throw the nets on the other side!"

Why not? They had tried everything else. And amazingly they hauled in the kind of catch that they could only have dreamed of.

There is something in this story about the disciples learning that with Jesus there is no going back ... there is only moving forward.

They now had to learn to live their lives under the direction of the risen Jesus ... living from his wisdom and not their own.

That meant that they had to find new purpose in their lives, now that they had encountered the risen Jesus. There was no going back for them. Even their fishing could only now be fulfilling under his direction.

A number of years ago the Royal Sun and Alliance Insurance Company decided to change its image. So it began to trade under the name of 'More Than'. It wanted to present the image that the company is 'more than' just a run of the mill, boring insurance company.

Well, with Jesus, it is never simply about an image makeover, but the risen Jesus takes us and calls us to be, and empowers us to be more than the career choices, the life choices that we have made in the past.

In company with him, these disciples were now called to be more than fishermen, more than tax collectors.

For us, it may not be about a change of career, but we are always with Jesus called to be more than accountants, teachers, solicitors, ministers, cleaners, parents, home-makers. Indeed, more than whatever we have been defined as, or that we choose to define ourselves as.

Then secondly, we have Peter's very personal encounter with Jesus.

Peter was the first to rush out of the boat once he realised it was Jesus on the shore.

But there was still unfinished business.

There was the matter of Peter's denial. And Jesus knew that he couldn't just let that fester unresolved. There is no telling how that kind of memory could have played out in Peter's life at a later date.

Powerful memories like that can come back to haunt us, if we haven't dealt with them – given them some sort of closure. It could have left Peter with a nagging self-doubt gnawing away at his insides.

Yet nor did Jesus want to address it head on. Had he just brought it up and tried to talk to Peter about it, Peter could easily have misunderstood him – thought he was having a go. Playing the, 'I told you so,' game.

And so Jesus asks him the question, 'Do you love me, Peter?'

And he asks him the question three times ... that's why Peter gets so upset with the repeated question.

Not just because Jesus doesn't seem to trust his answer, but because the three times reminds him of the three denials. On the third occasion, Peter doubtless hears the echoes of the cock crowing.

But equally, by addressing the issue in this way, Jesus is saying to Peter, 'It's not what you said then that matters, it's what you say now. Do you love me?'

It's enough ... it's dealt with. And once again, despite the hesitation and the downright failure of the past, Peter is re-commissioned by Jesus three times.

- Feed my lambs
- Take care of my sheep
- Feed my sheep
- And then a final - Follow me!

Jesus is saying to Peter, 'It's not the past that shapes you and defines you, it is who you are now, and who I am now calling you to be, despite your past.'

It wasn't so much that Jesus needed to be convinced of Peter's love for him. It was rather that Jesus knew that Peter needed to be convinced himself.

He was the kind who would blurt things out, when everyone else would keep quiet ... but after the episode in the courtyard Peter knew only too well his capacity to stumble.

Jesus wanted Peter to trust him, but to trust himself as well ...

If there was no going back to Galilee and no going back to fishing for the disciples, then there was no going back to the courtyard for Peter. Jesus would not allow this to haunt and shape him ...

Jesus lovingly sets him free from constantly going back to that moment, and feeling shaped and defined by it.

And then, thirdly, we have the story of Saul – later to be known as Paul – on the road to Damascus.

This, perhaps, is the most remarkable transformation.

Once again, we have someone given new direction by Jesus.

But in Paul's case, what a new direction. He is stopped in his tracks and his life is turned around completely.

He begins as someone who is hate-filled. We would talk about him today as someone who had been radicalised.

He was so devoted to his beliefs about God, that anyone who stood for a different belief about God was seen as an enemy of the people and an enemy of God.

And if those people claimed to worship the same God, then they had to be silenced at all costs, because the true religion of Israel should not be challenged.

And so he was travelling to Damascus to root out the Christians who had sprung up among the Jewish community in the city, with the intent of arresting them and taking them back to Jerusalem for trial and their due punishment.

But whatever it was in his past that had made Saul the way he was, God saw other possibilities within him. God saw a new future for Saul. He saw in Saul what others would never have seen.

Notice how, as with Peter, Jesus approaches Saul with a question.

With Peter it was, 'Do you love me?'

With Saul it is, 'Why are you persecuting me?'

The risen Jesus comes not so much handing out answers, as asking questions of us. Questions that put us on the spot. Questions that challenge the direction of our lives. Questions that invite us into conversation and relationship with him. Questions that make us search ourselves deeply.

And this question made Saul think again about God. He knew from all of his reading of the Scriptures that this could only be an encounter with God ... which is why he addresses this voice from nowhere as 'Lord'.

But he thought he knew God ... better than anyone else. He had grown up studying the laws and the scriptures of God. He thought he knew what it meant to be faithful to God. He thought he knew what God required of him.

He had never knowingly persecuted God!

The question, 'Who are you Lord?' reveals his sudden uncertainty.

The response, 'I am Jesus' then transforms his life. If this really is an encounter with the risen Jesus, then everything he thought he had known about God is turned on its head.

And this is the beginning of the process in which Saul is called from being the persecutor of the church to becoming one of the key movers and shakers of the early Christian movement.

And what a transformation.

From someone who persecuted, to someone who faced persecution.

From someone who threw out murderous threats, to someone who espoused the way of peace and forgiveness.

From someone who was zealous to prove himself as head and shoulders above everyone else in his commitment to God, to someone who taught the way of servant love.

No longer defined by his birth, his nationality, his past supposed faithfulness and zeal for God ... but now defined by his love for and faith in Jesus as the risen, crucified Lord of his life.

If someone's life-course had been set in stone, you would have thought it would have been Paul's. He had surely gone too far to be able to pull back, or indeed to be pulled back.

But not with the risen Jesus.

In the words of the hymn, 'Lord for the years':

'Past put behind us, for the future take us:
Lord of our lives, to live for Christ alone.'