

Feed my Sheep

On this final Sunday of our Easter season, as next week is Pentecost, we encounter in our readings today the resurrected Jesus meeting the disciples at the sea shore. Again, it is another fishing story, a story that tells us that the disciples had caught nothing. All night they had been out fishing, and they returned with their empty nets. "Haven't you any fish?" Jesus shouts to them – "No nothing, they reply!"

The disciple John is making the point that without Jesus in our boats, in our lives, in our Churches, we have nothing to show for all our hard work!

The Psalmist pens it beautifully in Psalm 127 v1

*Unless the LORD builds the house,
those who build it labour in vain.*

Having been brought up in a fishing village on Loch Fyne, those fishing stories resonate with me. When I was 16, I worked for six months on a forty-foot fishing boat on the West Coast of Scotland, and I experienced some of the hardships that fishermen face. I know what it is to work all night and catch nothing. It's a tough and dangerous life being a fisherman and it's fishermen that Jesus calls to be his first disciples.

No doubt the disciples were tired and hungry and ready for their beds, and it is the last thing that a fisherman would want to hear from an onlooker, "Go back out and cast your net on the *right* side of the boat."

In other words, you have been fishing all night, on the wrong side. Nobody likes to be shown up!

Three years earlier, and a similar situation happened, when Jesus was at the seashore, he saw Simon Peter, James and John returning from a night's fishing, and they had caught nothing.

He told them to go back out into the deep water and throw their nets over the boat, and they caught so many fish that their nets were about to burst, and he told them that from now on they would be catching people. This was the initial moment that these disciples left everything to follow Jesus.

But three years on, and things were much different. Jesus had been crucified and resurrected. He was now on the other side of life but he was still with them.

Peter had just denied him three times when he was asked if he knew Jesus. When the cock crowed Peter wept bitterly. He had let his Lord down. He felt ashamed and guilty and now here he was again, in the presence of Jesus, once again, and he was being given a second chance, or was it a third chance.... as Jesus drew close and asked him three questions which go like this.... *do you love me Peter, do you love me more than these Peter, do you really, really love me* and Peter responded, "Lord you know all things, you know I love you!" *Well, feed my sheep,* said Jesus!

The metaphor of fisherman had turned to the metaphor of the shepherd. Here was Peter's defining moment, the moment that he was recommissioned, forgiven and sent out. He was to be both fisherman, winning people to follow Jesus, and also shepherd, feeding people's souls and lives with God's Word.

It is a word also for us this morning, the same question comes to us...do you love Jesus? Do you really love him? Do you love him more than these?

Here we see the defining marks of a Christian.

These are people who have met with Jesus. People who have been moved and touched by his grace. People who have experienced his forgiveness. People who have responded to this question, *do you love me more than these?*

Then the Christian hears his commission, *feed my sheep*...In other words, serve me, by reaching out and serving my people.

In this story, we have the beginning of the Church. Peter's faith became the bedrock for the Church. When Peter declared to Jesus, in an earlier instance when Jesus asked him who he was, he said, "You are the Christ, Son of the living God", Jesus said, *on this rock I will build my Church.*

So, with our profession of faith, comes our discipleship and that discipleship involves us following Jesus. Jesus said to Peter after his restoration and commission, two simple words...words that he had previously said, *Follow Me!*

That is what we are also called to do. Follow Jesus, go where he leads us, do whatever he calls us to do in his name. This is His Church, it's not our Church, we are simply stewards for him, and he has charged us with feeding his people, reaching out and calling others to follow, and to nurture them in that relationship.

Today we are thinking especially about Christian Aid, and we see in Christian Aid an example of people responding to Jesus' message of love and grace by reaching out to help others.

Christian Aid is part of the life of the Church of Scotland; Christian Aid began within the Church of Scotland, after the Second World War, when refugees throughout Europe and even in Germany were destitute and one minister reached out in love, and shortly after that the momentum grew and Christian Aid was born.

Unashamedly reaching out in Christ's name to a lost and hurting world, Christian Aid draws near to the neediest people and teaches them how to fish, how to survive, how to feed their own people.

This year Christian Aid is touching the lives of people in Malawi. A country which struggles in many ways and the recent cyclone and climate change continue to cause havoc.

For thousands of farming families in Malawi, pigeon peas are a route out of poverty. The mighty pigeon pea is drought resistant, so thrives in the dry fields of southern Malawi. It's an essential part of the diet of millions of people around the world.

This Christian Aid Week we share the challenges experienced by communities in Malawi. Covid, climate change, conflict in Ukraine and the cost-of-living crisis mean that in Malawi, soaring costs of food and essentials are crushing dreams, keeping people in desperate poverty.

But there is hope.

Together with our partners, Christian Aid empowers vulnerable communities to find practical and sustainable ways out of poverty, including giving them the skills to:

- grow crops (like pigeon peas!) that are more resilient to the climate crisis
- restore soil fertility
- increase harvests
- learn business skills
- join cooperatives to earn more for their crops.

Christian Aid is our hands and feet, in Malawi, doing the work of Jesus, reaching out with love and compassion and feeding the stomachs of people with little resources.

So, by responding to the work of Christian Aid, we are responding to the call of Jesus, *come and follow me*.

Jesus said to his disciples in the parable of the sheep and goats.

“Whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me—you did it to me.”

These are moving words, that Jesus claims to be in the poorest and the weakest, and when we are reaching out with love then we are actually feeding Christ. It’s a brilliant way to look at the poor and think – could that be Jesus? Is Jesus in that person? Well, somehow, he claims to be!

I will finish with a short prayer written by that great reformer Martin Luther in the 15th century.

“Behold Lord an empty vessel that needs to be filled. My Lord, fill it. I am weak in the faith; strengthen me. I am cold in love; warm and make me fervent, that my love may go out to my neighbour. I do not have a strong and firm faith; at times I doubt and unable to trust you all together. O Lord, help me. Strengthen my faith and trust in you.

Amen