

‘Do you love me?’

John 21

Question - When was the last time you were at a bonfire?

A bonfire is one of those things that fills the senses. Hearing the crackle of the burning wood. The sight of the glowing flame that draws the eye to stare at it. Taste maybe doesn't apply, unless it involves marshmallows. And touch should definitely not be on the agenda!

But the smell... That's maybe the most powerful, lingering, evocative impact on our senses. The smell of the wood burning, the smokey richness of it. The sense of smell, perhaps like no other sense, has the power to bring back memories.

You can be going about your day to day life, when suddenly, a smell will hit you and bring back a memory, perhaps from years ago, perhaps even from childhood. A perfume or aftershave that brings a name to mind. A scent that smells just like something you used to love eating. Or a bonfire, that brings back memories of bonfires you have gathered around before.

In John 21, when Simon Peter saw a bonfire, and caught the smokey aroma, where would his mind have gone? Where else except the last time he was at a bonfire? In John 18, Peter was drawn in to a bonfire to keep warm on a dark, chilly April's night. There, he denied knowing Jesus three times.

Here in John 21, that memory interrupts his day to day life and work. When he sees Jesus again, as he did that night. When he sees the bonfire, and catches its smell. When Jesus asks him three times if Peter loves Him - once for every time that Peter had denied it.

In this chapter, Jesus is deliberately opening up memories. He's bringing up the past, in order to shape the future. Firstly in vv.1-14, we'll see how He does that for His disciples as a whole community. Then, we'll move on in vv. 15-23 to see how Jesus opens up memories and opens out the future for Peter - and perhaps for you - in his individual walk with Jesus.

Chapter 21 reads like an epilogue to a story that finished with the last verses of chapter 20, vv.30-31: - 'Jesus did many miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name.'

It's like one of those scenes you get in plays and films where people are doing just what they were doing at the start of the story, in the same place that we found them - except we know as we watch that there has been an incredible adventure in between the two scenes. Everything appears to be the same, but actually, the people we are watching have been marked forever by what they've seen and heard.

There's a boat, with some fishermen going about their everyday work. They're out on the water in the hours before sunrise, the best time to try to catch fish. They've struck out; they've caught nothing. Weary and worn, they see the dawn rise, and with it their chances of catching any fish that night disappear.

But as the dawn breaks, they hear a voice from the shore. 'Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some.'

A memory is opened up for these fishermen, it stirs within them as they hear a voice that they know oh, so well. The day when they were first called to follow a man named Jesus.

Read Luke 5:1-11

That memory courses through their imaginations as the fishermen do what the man on the shore says. The net goes down, and the fish come back up with it. A net-bursting catch. Everything about the scene is the same; and in v.7, John the beloved disciple, our author, sees what is going on and lights up, just as he did at the empty tomb - 'It is the Lord!'

Peter responds true to form - literally diving in, swimming ahead to get to where Jesus is. Then, they all arrive to one of the most inviting, and one of the strangest verses in all of the Bible.

In v.12, Jesus invites them - 'Come and have breakfast.' He's already got some fish, he doesn't need theirs, but he calls them to bring what they have to offer anyway. He gives them this gift of prepared food and welcomes them to another meal with Him. He welcomes us to share a meal with Him in communion later this morning.

And then the strange part. 'None of the disciples dared ask Him, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Lord.' There was something different about this

risen Jesus, so that His followers *wanted* to ask who He was. But there was something unmistakably the same about Him, they *knew* that it was Jesus.

That, I suppose, is resurrection life for you. Because of Jesus' death and resurrection, all who are in Christ will live beyond death in an eternally living physical body. I don't expect that we would be able to really recognise or comprehend that with the eyes of our present broken world, anymore than the disciples could. But I'm not surprised that they didn't ask the question stirring in their hearts - because Jesus' followers *know* Jesus' voice, as John 10 taught us.

The risen Jesus was unmistakably the same Jesus, but unmistakably different now, because of His resurrection life. In the same way, this whole scene is unmistakably the same as when Jesus first called His followers, but unmistakably different, because now, they know about His death and resurrection.

Their day to day life is unmistakably the same - they are still fishermen, plying their trade, earning their wage, supporting their families. But their day to day life is unmistakably different now, because it has been interrupted by the risen Lord Jesus Christ. He tells them how to do things differently in their work, and to trust His lead on that.

John has already told us that Jesus has died, and risen, and that by believing these things, you may have life in His name. John's gospel could finish at chapter 20 if following Jesus was simply about you as an individual getting a clean conscience and a ticket to Heaven. But now, in chapter 21, John tells us: 'P.S... Jesus is calling us as His followers to bring other people in to that life. We're called to catch the fish.'

It's no coincidence or wasted time for John to tell us that Jesus already had some fish on the fire. John is telling us that Jesus can catch fish without our help. He'll bring whom He wants to bring into His Kingdom. He doesn't need us to help. But here's the thing... He *wants* us to help, and calls us to, and commands us to.

And though Jesus doesn't *need us* for that task, we *do need Him* for the task. The fishermen didn't catch anything until they stopped what they were doing, and listened to Jesus' lead for them. Then, they caught more fish than they knew what to do with.

As a whole church, we are called to be in the same families, work places, friendships and clubs that we are in just now - but to be unmistakably different within them. For people to see in us and hear from us how Jesus has changed us. That is something we can't do by ourselves - but it will happen when we have been interrupted by the risen Jesus transforming our lives, and when we are continually open to Him interrupting us by His Holy Spirit to lead us afresh.

Question - What is Jesus calling us to do as a church?

The final verses of John's gospel are some of the most moving and significant verses in the Bible. And without them, Peter's life journey of following Jesus wouldn't work. Because vv.15-23 are in John's gospel; there is hope, peace, forgiveness and fullness of life for Peter. And it's there for you, too.

Put yourself in Peter's, well... sandals. In John 13, Peter declared confidently that he would follow Jesus to the end; that he would lay down his life for Jesus. Then, in John 18, Peter had his chance to do just that - but instead, he denied even knowing Jesus three times, and then broke down crying at sunrise, when it dawned on him what he had done at that fireside.

Then Jesus died. Peter's friend, master, life-defining Lord was no more. How bereft Peter must have felt, because of that loss, and because of how things were between them when Jesus died.

Then Jesus rose again. The incredible news, the joy, the triumph, the ecstasy that thrilled the hearts of all His followers! But for Peter, it was all tinged with something else. There was unfinished business between Jesus and Peter.

We need John 19 to tell us that Jesus died, so the slate is wiped clean - there's no legal record of wrongdoing on our account to separate us from God anymore. We need John 20 to tell us that Jesus rose again, so death is not the end - there is an eternal relationship with our Father God to be enjoyed now. But we also need John 21. Because a legal forgiveness, and an eternal timeline, are not the sum total of a relationship with God.

You can hear and believe that through Jesus' death, there is forgiveness of sin. You can hear and believe that through Jesus' resurrection, there is eternal life with God. But I guess some Christians amongst us know how that can turn into some flat, joyless party line that sits doesn't seem to relate to the hurts, the unfinished business, the real stuff between you and God.

Come to John 21 though, and just as with Peter, Jesus can deal with it. It's time to open up some memories, and some wounds.

Another dawn. Another bonfire. Everything about the scene filled Peter with the memory of his fireside betrayal. Now, Jesus does that thing that people find so awkward in damaged friendships. He turns to Peter during the group conversation, and says, 'Shall we take a walk together? I want to talk to you.'

Maybe Peter gulps. The two of them walk, side by side, along the beach.

'Peter, do you really love me more than these?'

Peter knows it's a fair question. He used to claim a greater love and service and devotion to Jesus than any of the other disciples. But all the gusto and bravado has been taken out of him, too much has happened that he never expected. His awful betrayal. Jesus' *resurrection!* But Peter still has a little boldness left. He does that thing that people do, only when they really know each other and love each other. He doesn't just say, 'Yes, Lord, I love you...'

'Yes, Lord, *you know* that I love you.'

'Feed my lambs.'

As ever, Jesus surprises Peter in His response. Three short words, but a lifetime of service defined by them - 'Feed my lambs.' Peter is to pastor, protect, and provide for Jesus' followers now.

They walk on together some more.

'Peter, do you really love me?'

Peter gulps again. He knows it's fair of Jesus to ask. Not just whether Peter loves Jesus more than the others do, but whether Peter really, truly, does love Jesus.

'Yes, Lord, *you know* that I love you.'

Again comes the reply, 'Take care of my sheep.'

And now the third time. Perhaps Peter sees it coming, waiting for it to arrive like the sharp pain of pulling the bandage from a wound that hasn't been properly treated. Now it hits him. The third time Jesus asks, for the third denial Peter had uttered when he had last been asked.

'Peter... do you love me?'

The tears well up in Peter's eyes this time. Jesus has gently but firmly opened up the 'thing' that there is between them. And in all honesty, in a

humbled brokenness, and a moment of release and redemption, Peter replies:

‘Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.’

And a third time comes the reply, ‘Feed my sheep.’

And then, it dawns on Peter what has happened. Jesus has forgiven Him, renewed their relationship, and in the same breath trusted him again. He hasn’t just trusted Peter with clearing up the breakfast, either. He has trusted this restored, forgiven sinner with a lifetime of care for His precious followers. Peter has been healed, to serve. And he could not serve - not really - not until he had been healed.

And Jesus trusts Peter with something else in vv.18-19. Peter once said that he would lay down his life for Jesus. He blew it when the time came. But now, Jesus tells him that a time will come when Peter will lay down his life for Jesus. It’s going to happen. When Jesus tells Peter that someone will stretch out his hands, He means that Peter, too, will die on the cross, and it would glorify God. It would point other people to Jesus Christ.

And with that haunting promise ringing in Peter’s ears, Jesus looks him in the eye and says, ‘Follow me!’ Those were the words at the start of the adventure. When these ordinary fishermen heard Jesus’ call, and had no idea where it would lead them, Jesus had said, ‘Follow me!’

Now, the words mean an awful lot more to Peter. Behind him now are years of discovering Jesus’ words and actions, and a moment of awful failure; Jesus’ cross and an empty tomb. Ahead of him is a life of teaching and protecting Jesus’ followers, and a death of violence. And next to him now, Jesus says again, ‘Follow me!’ Does Peter do it? You bet he does.

Peter has been forgiven, called once again to follow Jesus, and entrusted with a particular job to do in this world for Jesus. Jesus speaks the same forgiveness, call and commission to each one of us.

Peter and John were very different characters. Peter was the preacher, the leader, the pioneer who charged in. John was the discerner, the one who saw things first, the reflective writer. Peter would die on a cross. John would live to an old age and die after many long years of ministry. As we follow Jesus together, we all have a different part to play.

Picture this as an image in your mind. Picture all of us, as a church, literally following Jesus ahead of us. You’re side by side with the people in this room.

What *she* does on this journey is not the same as what you do. Where *he* is being led is not where you are being led. Yet we are together on this discipleship journey, because Jesus wouldn't have it any other way.

When Peter sees John following behind them on the beach, he asks Jesus about John's journey. Is he destined to be killed for Christ too? What will his work for Jesus be? And Jesus tells Peter, 'That's not your concern.' And He repeats to Peter what his concern must be - 'As for *you*, follow *me*.'

You can get so caught up with other people's journeys of following Jesus, that you're not paying attention to Jesus calling *you* to follow Him. Mind your own walk.

That's not to say that Peter wasn't to care about John's faith. John was one of the sheep whom Jesus had just called Peter to lead and care for. But it is to say that Peter wasn't to concern himself with discovering John's life destiny, or to get caught up with how John was to serve and where that would take him. That was John's concern. Peter's concern was to follow Jesus, and do what Jesus had given him to do in this world.

Now, how about you? At a meal with His disciples, Jesus spoke one-to-one with Peter, opening up the burden in that relationship, and dealing with it in that moment. Today, the same thing is happening. We come to a meal called communion. Our senses will be given bread and wine to experience - touch, smell, taste - to remember the crucified Jesus.

Jesus comes to you, every bit as precious a follower to Him as Peter. And He comes by His Spirit to open up with you that burden you haven't really dealt with, that 'thing' that there is between you and God. So let Him open you up. Let His Spirit convict you, renew you, and bring you His peace.

Hear Jesus' call to follow Jesus, in all that that means. Listen for what He calls you to do in this world for Him - and how that might be different from what you're doing now. And answer Jesus when He asks you - 'Do you really love me?'

Epilogue - vv.24-25

John has finished his book now. It's taken us the best part of a year to journey through it together. He's told us about Jesus, the Word of God who became flesh. The Light of the World breaking into the darkness. We've seen signs and heard words pointing us to 'believe in Jesus.' John has told us that in Jesus there is life to the full, now and forever - but it's only for those who are 'in Christ Jesus.'

We've heard that believing in His death, we're forgiven. Believing in His resurrection, we will be raised to life beyond our deaths. And following Jesus, we're called to make Him known to others, serving Him as we're healed by Him.

Now, people in John's church tell us in v.24 that everything John has written are the words of an eye witness who has seen and known the truth about Jesus. What we've read together is true.

And in v.25, John gets the last word Himself. There was more, so much more, to say about Jesus. The world itself could not contain the stories, just it could never contain or box Jesus Himself. But here, John tells us again what he told us at the end of the last chapter - that he has told us enough. What we have read and heard and talked through and prayed through together, is enough. It's enough to believe in Jesus.

So do you?