

ON THE BEACH

Nothing to Offer?

I think I know the answer to this question, but I wonder what you might think. What's the most annoying question you could ask a fisherman? When I was a kid one of the things I loved to do was to go fishing. In Wimborne, where I grew up, there was a river which ran through the town, the river Allen. It wasn't a big, wide river, but it was big enough to fish in. And that's what we did – we went fishing in the river Allen. When we first went fishing, we made our own fishing rods out of a piece of bamboo.

I can still remember the first fishing rod I bought. It was a two-piece, carbon fibre rod, blue in colour with a cork handle onto which you could attach your reel. The reel I had was called an Intrepid Black Prince. The rod cost me £ 2.29 which I bought with the £ 2.30 I got for my birthday!

My friends and I would spend hours fishing. We didn't really ever catch much – minnows mostly. Once though, I caught my friend Marc Collins, hooked him right through his upper lip – but that's another story!

When we were fishing, the most annoying question a passer-by could ask us was: "What have you caught?" It was annoying because mostly we caught nothing, and the question assumed we'd bagged a catch.

There might, though, be an even more annoying question you could ask a fisherman, especially a professional.

21 Afterward Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Galilee. It happened this way: ² Simon Peter, Thomas (also known as Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together. ³ "I'm going out to fish," Simon Peter told them, and they said, "We'll go with you." So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

⁴ Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus.

⁵ He called out to them, "Friends, haven't you any fish?"

"No," they answered.

⁶ He said, “Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some.” When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish.

⁷ Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, “It is the Lord,” he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water. ⁸ The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a hundred yards.
(John 21 v 1-8)

They fished all night and caught nothing. They were tired and no doubt frustrated and disappointed: there would be no breakfast and no sales. A stranger appears on the shore and asks a question that might not go down too well: “Haven’t you caught anything?” It’s a question that assumes the answer will be ‘No!’ And, the answer is ‘No!’ Because they have caught nothing.

What we know, because we have the story and have read it to the end, but the disciples do not yet know, is that the stranger on the shore is Jesus. What we also know that they do not yet know, is that he has come to help them. Perhaps there are two miracles in this account. One is clear and obvious – the disciples catch a huge haul of fish, possibly the biggest of their lives after a night when they caught nothing. But, before that, they follow the instructions of a stranger on the shore who tells them to cast their net on the right side of the boat. At that point in the story, according to John’s account, they have not recognised that the stranger on the shore is Jesus.

Geoff Lucas makes the following observation: ‘A fishing trip was changed when the disciples obeyed a stranger’s directions. But the fishermen’s lives were utterly changed when they saw the man on the shore with clarity and then shared a meal with him’¹

Here is, I think, a most challenging, but very important question – ‘Who is the Jesus you follow?’ Perhaps this story paints a picture of a Jesus too many of us, sadly miss completely.

It turns out the NIV translation of the word “Friends” (v5) is not the best translation here. A better translation might be “lads” or “children.” John is the only writer to use this word and, in his letters, uses it to address a young Christian community. So, in 1 John 2 v 12 he writes: “I am writing to you dear

¹ Lucas, J “*Faith in the Fog*,” CWR 2020 p 98

children.” And in 1 John 2 v 18 he writes: “Dear children, this is the last hour.” The word carries a warmth and tenderness that is tender and personal.

⁴ Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus.

⁵ He called out to them, “Hey lads, haven’t you any fish?” (John 21 v 4-5)

Jesus comes to them as their close friend, one of the group, one who is intimately interested in what is going on for them, and he comes ready to help. And Jesus comes to them in their deepest pain, when they are frustrated, tired, disillusioned and despondent. He comes to them when everything has come crashing down around them – even the thing they thought they knew best. And he speaks to them in a tender, compassionate way, asking a question, not making a demand. A question that carries a warmth and intimacy that comes from knowing them well.

So, let me ask you: How does God come to you? I’m wondering if your God is the God who comes asking questions in a tender, compassionate way, with your best interests at heart. I wonder though, that many of us have a different God, one who is harsh and demanding. And here’s the challenge: what you believe about God will determine how you live.

Imagine this:

The disciples see a man standing on the shore in the early morning. He’s waving frantically and it’s clear he wants them to come to the shore. As they get closer, they can see that he’s angry, and it seems, angry at them. He has a question for them, but it’s cold and harsh: “What do you think you are doing? Why are you here, fishing again? Didn’t you listen to anything I said?” The irritation in his voice is clear and he has more to say; “I told you, you were to be fishers of men, and yet, at the first chance you get, you are back here, in Galilee, on the lake, fishing! I’m beginning to realise I wasted my time with you lot! What was I thinking? And you can’t even catch fish anymore!”

I’m wondering if the God who comes to you, is the one who is tender and warm, or the one who is cold and demanding. It seems to me, friends, that, in truth, many of us have a god who is more like the latter than the former. Many of us have a god who is mostly unimpressed with what we do and how we are, who is both somewhat demanding and more interested in commands than questions.

Here is, perhaps, another way of thinking about it. Last week we reflected on the deep and profound truth that God doesn't always do what we expect. When God finally speaks to Job, after a long, long silence he has something unexpected to say, and how we read what God says, makes a difference as to what kind of God Job has.

38 Then the LORD spoke to Job out of the storm. He said:

² “Who is this that obscures my plans
with words without knowledge?

³ Brace yourself like a man;
I will question you,
and you shall answer me. (Job 39 v 1-3)

Job wants answers from God, answers to why he has suffered so much when he is innocent. But God's response is somewhat unexpected. You can, if you want to, read these opening words as a harsh rebuke of Job. God, in a booming voice and demeaning tone saying: “Who is this who darkens my counsel?” This is a God very much in the role of a judge, irritated by the criminal standing before him. He is indignant: how dare Job stand before him and ask questions of things he knows nothing about. What can Job possibly know about and understand about how God operates in the world? If that is a good way to read the text, you have to ask yourself what kind of God is he? What is God really like?

Maybe though, he's your God? Perhaps this is the stranger on the beach, waiting for the disciples. Perhaps this is the God who is waiting for you?

I think, in fact I'm convinced, there is a better way to read these words, and it leads to a completely different understanding of who God is and what God is like. We can, I believe, read these words as a gentle, but extraordinarily loving reproof. It's as if God says: “Ah, Job! So glad you're here. I hear your struggles and I really want to answer them and help you. But things are a little bit more complex than simple answers. I realise that's not what you want to hear – we'd all like simple answers, but this is a world where love is possible. I'm going to show you some things which will help you see a different picture and, I hope, something of who I really am. And I hope that after this, you will see that I am worth following.”

Then, from verse four onwards, God takes Job on a tour of the universe, showing him how wonderful, brilliant and extraordinary it is. He shows Job just how much he delights in everything he has made, even the things that have nothing to offer God. He shows Job that he is the God who loves because he loves because he loves.

One commentator writing about why God would create and love a world like that says; “Because God loves pizzazz! Because he revels and delights in the beauty and delight and joy of the strategic creature that will never do him any good. He just loves to give.” Job’s tour of the universe reveals a God who is endlessly good, uncontrollably generous and irrationally loving.

Back on the beach, Jesus asks: “Hey lads, haven’t you any fish?” Although its obvious, the disciples tell the truth and answer: “No!” Sometimes friends, it is simply best to be honest with God and tell him we have nothing. Maybe I’m the only one, but there are times when I feel I am at the end of myself, my faith, my talents, my abilities, my enthusiasm and my desire to serve God even. And perhaps this story teaches that it’s ok to tell God that and be honest about it, and that God still comes to us in that place.

Actually, its better than that because the stranger on the shore comes with tender compassion, full of love, ready to help. Nowhere in this account are the disciples condemned for being in Galilee, for being on the lake, for going back to their old life, for going fishing or for catching nothing – nowhere!

What kind of God do you have?

The wonderful truth is that although God often surprises us, he is not surprised by us. Incredibly, the disciples follow the instructions of the stranger on the shore and cast their net over the right side of the boat for one more trawl of the water. The catch is enormous, huge, the biggest of their lives and so big they struggle to manage it.

It takes John to recognise who the stranger on the shore is, but Peter is first out of the boat... again! This is Peter, who, when they first met Jesus on a beach and went fishing with him, declared that he was unworthy to be in Jesus’ presence, that he was unclean and sinful. This is Peter, who after declaring he would never run away, chose to deny he even knew Jesus at the moment Jesus needed him the most. This is Peter, who has now apparently abandoned fishing for men and gone back to his old life, the one he had before he even knew Jesus. Peter, who in this moment, has nothing to offer and

nothing to bring, but who leaps into the water. Peter, who is welcomed by the stranger on the shore, the Jesus whom Peter followed and abandoned.

Friends, the same is true today for you and me. Jesus longs to welcome you – he really does. Perhaps he'd say to you today; "Hey, Ian, haven't you any fish? Come anyway, I'd so much love to be with you!"

Why is the catch of fish so big? Wouldn't enough fish have been, well, enough? Perhaps God really is endlessly good, uncontrollably generous and irrationally loving. Perhaps it simply points to God's extraordinary generosity in the face of our emptiness and poverty.

So, friends, who is the God you say you believe in?

Perhaps, what began for these fishermen with nothing, led to transformation when they saw who the stranger on the shore really was. Could the same be true for you? That when you bring an offering of nothing and place it in the hands of who God really is, transformation is possible? It's certainly worth thinking about, isn't it?

Preached in Crawley Baptist Church on Sunday 23rd May 2021, and Live streamed at 10.30am. By
Rev. Ian Phillips.