

## ON THE BEACH

A charcoal Fire

For 14 summers between 1985 and 1998 I was on the beach as part of Nefyn Mission. Ever since 1929 Scripture Union held a Beach Mission at Nefyn Beach in North Wales. And every year as part of the Mission's activities, there would be a family fun evening. A family evening was, as the name suggests, an evening of fun and games on the beach for all the family. Based on the theme of that year's mission there would be games, dancing, singing and activities for between 300-400 people of all ages.

My favourite game ever at a family fun evening was when we celebrated 60 years of the mission in 1989. The theme that year was the 1920's, surprisingly, and so we played games from that era – or that we decided were from that era. The game that was my favourite was hunt the pea. Imagine that – we actually had people looking for peas in an area of sand! But my favourite part of the whole evening was the BBQ!

We would make an enormous fire, bring down hot dogs and refreshments, sit everybody down, and share the gospel. There was simply something extraordinarily powerful about 400 people sitting round a fire, eating together when God was present.

Perhaps, round the fire and the meal, God spoke his truth.

**21** Afterward Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Galilee. It happened this way: <sup>2</sup> Simon Peter, Thomas (also known as Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together. <sup>3</sup> "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.

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

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

"No," they answered.

<sup>6</sup> 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.

<sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a hundred yards. <sup>9</sup> When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread.

<sup>10</sup> Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish you have just caught." <sup>11</sup> So Simon Peter climbed back into the boat and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, 153, but even with so many the net was not torn. (John 21 v 1-11)

After a long night's fishing, the fire on the beach would have been a welcome sight, not only for the warmth but also the food that was already being cooked by Jesus. For Peter though, a fire would have triggered a painful memory.

<sup>15</sup> Simon Peter was following Jesus, and *so was* another disciple. Now that disciple was known to the high priest, and he entered with Jesus into the courtyard of the high priest, <sup>16</sup> but Peter was standing at the door outside. So the other disciple, who was known to the high priest, went out and spoke to the doorkeeper, and brought Peter in. <sup>17</sup> Then the slave woman who was the doorkeeper said to Peter, "You are not also *one* of this Man's disciples, are you?" He said, "I am not." <sup>18</sup> Now the slaves and the officers were standing *there*, having made a charcoal fire, for it was cold and they were warming themselves; and Peter was also with them, standing and warming himself.

#### Peter's Denial of Jesus

<sup>25</sup> Now Simon Peter was *still* standing and warming himself. So they said to him, "You are not *one* of His disciples as well, are you?" He denied *it*, and said, "I am not." <sup>26</sup> One of the slaves of the high priest, who was related to the one whose ear Peter cut off, \*said, "Did I not see you in the garden with Him?" <sup>27</sup> Peter then denied *it* again, and immediately a rooster crowed. (John 18 v 15-18; 25-27 NASB)

John records that Peter is warming himself over a charcoal fire when he, three times, denies he knows Jesus. He's making a very powerful and important point.

<sup>9</sup> So when they got out on the land, they saw a charcoal fire *already* made and fish placed on it, and bread. <sup>10</sup> Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish which you have now caught." <sup>11</sup> So Simon Peter went up and hauled the net to land, full of large fish, 153; and although there were so many, the net was not torn. (John 21 v 9-11 NASB)

On the beach, in the early morning, as Jesus comes to meet his disciples, and especially Peter, Jesus is cooking breakfast over a charcoal fire. The detail of a charcoal fire would not have been lost on Peter, or Jesus.

The charcoal fire confronts a painful truth. Peter had followed Jesus everywhere and been bold and courageous. Peter had stepped out of the boat. Peter had sworn he would protect Jesus and let no harm come to him. Peter had defended Jesus to the point of using his sword. Peter had boldly declared that he would never, under any circumstances leave Jesus.

The painful truth was, that when the heat was on, when the authorities were out to get Jesus, when Peter feared the authorities might be out to get him too, he was found wanting. Far from being at Jesus' side when things got rough and violent, Peter stood just far enough away so as not to be associated with him. And, when recognised by those around him as one who was with Jesus, he told bare faced lies: "I never knew him."

The painful truth is that Peter didn't come through on his promises. The painful truth is that Peter let Jesus down when Jesus needed him the most. The painful truth is that Peter was not the man he thought he was. I'm wondering: what's the painful truth you carry in your heart?

Why did Jesus cook fish over a charcoal fire that morning on the beach, do you suppose? Perhaps the answer to that question depends on which God you have.

Perhaps you have a cold, harsh, demanding God who is mostly unimpressed with anything you do and irritated by your presence. In which case, maybe Jesus lights a charcoal fire to point out to Peter the magnitude of his failure, and to remind him just how unworthy he really is.

Perhaps though, you have a God who is endlessly good, uncontrollably generous and irrationally loving, who is tender and gentle. In which case maybe the Jesus lights a charcoal fire because love confronts the truth, offers forgiveness and longs to restore.

The charcoal fire was not lost on Jesus or Peter. Jesus wants to meet Peter – and he wants to meet you.

How does your God come to you?

The challenge of love is that love confronts the truth. Love does not condemn, but love does not ignore the truth. On the beach, Jesus comes to extend to Peter forgiveness that will set him free... but to know forgiveness, Peter must confront the truth about himself. That's still how it works, friends.

God longs to meet us and extend forgiveness, but to receive that forgiveness we must confront the truth about ourselves. Forgiveness doesn't ignore the truth, and the truth is that mistakes, things we regret, the parts of us we don't want anyone else to know about, are real, they actually happened. A charcoal fire confronted the truth: Peter denied Jesus – and they both know it!

We tend to get hooked on thinking of forgiveness being needed for the things we did, or said, or thought. Forgiveness does not deny those things, but the forgiveness God extends is really about the heart. Jesus is on the beach not long after his death and resurrection. On the cross he chose to forgive those who tormented him. He chooses, on the beach, to forgive Peter. He chooses, here and now, to forgive people like you and me. A charcoal fire shows us that God looks at our sin, our failures, those things we most want to hide, recognises the truth of it, and forgives us anyway. God doesn't forget our sin; he chooses not to remember it.

And, let's be fair to Peter. Peter never set out to deny Jesus, but deny Jesus he did. I'm not so sure I'm not so different to Peter, and maybe, neither are you. The truth about God is, he declares that we are forgiven. Peter had to face the truth about himself – and so do we.

Jesus came to Peter, on the beach, just as he was... and the wonderful truth is that God comes to us, today, just as we are. I don't know for sure, but my best guess is that, after his denial, and the subsequent death of Jesus, Peter felt enormous shame. He was supposed to be the strong one, he was supposed to be a man of action and a man of his word. He was going to be the one who would never leave or desert Jesus, regardless of what any of the other disciples

did. And, although I don't know for sure, my best guess is that Peter understood his denials as his biggest failure.

In Peter's story he had become a failure. He now realises that he was not the man he claimed to be. We all have a story, and we all live in a story. The question is, which story do we live in? Or perhaps more accurately whose story do we live in?

When Jesus meets Peter over a charcoal fire on the beach that morning, he is reminding Peter of a bigger and far better story than Peter's own story. And by extending forgiveness, he is inviting Peter to live again, in the far bigger and far better story of God's magnificent love. The story that doesn't ignore the truth about who he is and what he has done... but confronts it and welcomes him into the story of God's love.

And the same is true for you and me. We can choose to live in our own story, or we can choose to live in the far bigger and far better story of God's magnificent love: to confront the truth about ourselves and accept God's forgiveness.

By any measure the 16<sup>th</sup> Century artist Michelangelo was a great painter – in fact he is regarded as a master painter. Although a brilliant artist, it turns out he was a socially inept and insecure man. He had a rivalry with Leonardo de Vinci that is legendary. One of his master pieces is painted on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel: The Creation of Adam.



We look at this painting and wonder how anyone could paint such a picture. Michelangelo however, was filled with self-doubt that often gave rise to a crisis of confidence in his own ability. One day, he suffered a particularly difficult day's painting up on the backbreaking scaffold. He went home and wrote in his journal: "I am no painter!"

Don't we, in different ways do the very same thing? We dwell on our own perceptions of ourselves and sometimes rush to the shocking conclusion that we are, in fact, no good. Truth is, Michelangelo's depiction of God and Adam was ground-breaking. Paintings before of God and Adam had always depicted Adam reaching toward God, who was standing on the ground, in effect helping Adam to his feet. But in Michelangelo's painting God appears to be moving towards Adam – almost impatient to close the gap between himself and the one he has created. God is as close to Adam as he can be.

That is the message Michelangelo apparently wanted to convey. But, there is a gap between God and Adam. God has come as close as he can be, but he leaves a gap – he leaves room for Adam to choose his response. Adam has to choose to move towards God.

Perhaps Michelangelo was so caught up in his own story, the thought of his own shortcomings, that he never grasped the dynamic truth he painted on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, the deep and profound truth that he could choose to live in God's far bigger and far better story.

On the beach, over a charcoal fire, God is as close to Peter as he can be. Jesus will reach toward Peter and extend his forgiveness, but there is a gap and Peter will have to choose his response. He can choose to live with, and in the story of, his own perception of himself. Or he can choose to confront his story, and choose instead to live in the reality of God's perception of him – the great story of God's love.

The truth about God's forgiveness is that it comes to restore. The disciples have fished all night and caught nothing. Following Jesus' instructions, they make one more cast on the right side of the boat, and bag the biggest catch of their lives. When they get to the beach, Jesus is already cooking fish over a charcoal fire, for breakfast. Jesus evidently bought, or caught, his own fish. But then, Jesus invites them to bring some of the fish they have just caught. Actually, he says: "Bring some of the fish you have just caught" (John 21 v 10) They'd only caught any fish because of a miracle, and yet Jesus says 'bring fish you have just caught.'

Forgiveness invites us, enables us, to participate once again and know that what we offer will be accepted in the story of God's great love. Truth is, we have nothing that God has not graciously given to us. Sometimes we feel unworthy and hesitate to bring anything to God, feeling the weight of our failure. But God is closer than we think, reaching towards us, meeting us at the

point of our deepest pain, ready to forgive and waiting for us to choose to move toward him. Then, without hesitation he welcomes us again and invites us to bring what he has given to us.

In Jesus' day, sharing a meal with someone was a sign of intimacy and fellowship. The Pharisees criticised Jesus for eating with the wrong kind of people (Luke 15 v 2). They thought that eating with someone who was unclean, a sinner, would make you unclean. Jesus declares that to be wrong and when he ate with people, they became clean.

Jesus met with Peter, the sinner and failure, over breakfast cooked on a charcoal fire, and in that act, God declared Peter, clean. Peter was welcomed into God's bigger and better story.

Perhaps, the truth is, God is waiting to have breakfast with you. He's as close as he can be, reaching towards you, and he is waiting for you to make your choice.

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by Rev. Ian Phillips.