

ON THE BEACH

What about him?

Today we come to the last talk in this series 'On the Beach!' I hope you have found it helpful. As we've gone through this chapter of John's gospel together, we've spent a long time thinking about Peter. What an interesting man Peter, it seems, was. I've heard Peter described as the disciple who had foot and mouth disease: every time he opened his mouth, he put his foot in it.

Sometimes, perhaps, we think of Peter as the brave disciple – the one who was actually brave enough to act on what Jesus said. He was, after all, as far as we know, the only disciple who walked on the water. Sometimes, perhaps, we think of him as the foolish disciple – the one who made rash promises or statements. "Jesus, I'll never desert you!"

As I said last week, I am in many ways very different to Peter - my coming to following Jesus was not as dramatic as Peter's. When Peter heard those words the first time: "Follow Me!" he did. And in that moment, everything changed for him. Suddenly in those moments the nets he was so used to didn't appeal in the same way anymore.

I have never spent time with Jesus the way Peter once did. Sometimes I wonder what it must have been like to actually be with Jesus, physically in his presence. What must it have been like to watch him day by day? What must it have been like to listen to him as he spoke to crowds and individuals? What must it have been like to hear him say things you just couldn't quite grasp? What must it have been like to witness the extraordinary things that happened as Peter followed Jesus?

In many ways I am not like Peter, but I have a sneaking suspicion that in some ways I am remarkably like Peter. Peter, it seems, sometimes jumped to conclusions – mostly when he didn't quite understand what was going on. When Jesus washed the disciple's feet, Peter declared that Jesus should wash his whole body. When Jesus began to speak about his coming death and resurrection, Peter tried to intervene and Jesus rebuked him.

On the beach, as Jesus talks to Peter, I find myself wondering if I see myself in Peter again.

21 Afterward Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Galilee.^[a] It happened this way: ² Simon Peter, Thomas (also known as Didymus^[b]), 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.^[c] ⁹ When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread.

¹⁰ Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish you have just caught.” ¹¹ 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. ¹² Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” None of the disciples dared ask him, “Who are you?” They knew it was the Lord. ¹³ Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. ¹⁴ This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead.

Jesus Reinstates Peter

¹⁵ When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?”

“Yes, Lord,” he said, “you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, "Feed my lambs."

¹⁶ Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"

He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep."

¹⁷ The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"

Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Feed my sheep. ¹⁸ Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go." ¹⁹ Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, "Follow me!"

²⁰ Peter turned and saw that the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them. (This was the one who had leaned back against Jesus at the supper and had said, "Lord, who is going to betray you?") ²¹ When Peter saw him, he asked, "Lord, what about him?"

²² Jesus answered, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me." ²³ Because of this, the rumour spread among the believers that this disciple would not die. But Jesus did not say that he would not die; he only said, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?" (John 21 v 1 – 23)

This is a remarkable encounter between Jesus and Peter. It begins as far as we can tell, with a despondent, disappointed and disillusioned Peter. Peter had gone back to the thing he knew best – fishing! After all he had experienced because he followed Jesus, he's gone back to the place he was before it had all started. No doubt his heart was heavy and his mind bemused. Fishing would help give him some reality as he muddled through his utter confusion. But, in the midst of all the confusion and uncertainty, Jesus turns up again.

He cooks them breakfast while they wrestle with their thoughts. Jesus takes Peter aside and asks him challenging questions about where his heart really is. When Peter declares that his heart is still with Jesus, Jesus presents him with

the prospect of a very challenging future. As if that's not enough, he again invites Peter to "Follow Me!"

There must have been a lot going on in Peter's mind at this point in the conversation. But at that moment Peter sees John, and asks: "What about Him?" It strikes me that in that moment I can be so like Peter. "What about him?" "What about her?" Surely Peter's mind was racing, trying to grasp what Jesus was really saying to him. Surely, he's wrestling with the implications of following Jesus once again, and what that might actually mean in practice. Surely, he's wondering what Jesus is saying about what the future holds for him, Peter, whose heart is with Jesus.

And then he sees John and asks, "What about him?" That's the kind of thing I do! The text, of course, doesn't actually tell us its John, John doesn't write about himself that way. But he describes himself as the disciple Jesus loved. Does Peter, in that moment, compare himself to John? The Bible records competition among the disciples. Is Peter, in truth, a little insecure about himself because he has seen a different relationship between Jesus and John than that between Jesus and himself?

Perhaps Peter is wondering if John is going to be told that he too will have a tough time if he chooses to follow Jesus again. Maybe he's thinking how unfair it would be if somehow Jesus spared John the very thing he seems to have promised Peter.

Here's a challenging thought: we know what happens to both Peter and John. Peter is martyred for following Jesus; hung upside down on a cross. John dies of old age (possibly in his 90's) having had a remarkable vision of the things of God, which we call the book of Revelation. We know that suffering is not evenly distributed among God's people. But, even knowing all that, I still have the capacity to be remarkably like Peter: "What about him?" "What about her?"

And its not limited to suffering – although I do wonder sometimes how come some seem to have an easier life than me. I can do it in a whole range of ways – especially in Ministry: How come they have more fruitful ministry than me?

Perhaps Peter didn't want to go through the challenges that lay ahead alone. It would be of great comfort to know that John would be with him in the flesh, even if Jesus wasn't.

But then, perhaps, what Jesus will say to John, is simply none of Peter's business! Truth is, whatever is going on for Peter, I find that in this, I can be remarkably like him.

Here's another thought: How much time, I wonder, do we, if we are honest, spend asking the same question Peter asked: "What about him?" "What about her?" Of course, we have our reasons: our own hurt; our own insecurities; our own struggle with faith; our own ways we measure ourselves and others; our own wishes and desires; our own humanness; our own sense of what is fair and unfair.

Thing is, we are on dodgy ground when we are comparing ourselves others, their life to ours, and using their life, or our life, their successes or our successes, as our measure. Jesus, it seems, is pretty blunt with Peter – he says it as it is; "Peter, that's none of your business!" However much it might have been in Jesus gift to tell Peter what John's story would be, he wasn't going to do it. Perhaps, truth is, it was Jesus' way of attending to Peter in that moment.

Let's be honest, how helpful would it have been for Peter in those moments for Jesus to reveal to him that John would endure some suffering, but not to the extreme Peter would, and that he would live to a ripe old age? And, Jesus would fully understand how Peter would be feeling about his challenging future, when he himself had experienced his own betrayal and crucifixion.

I can be remarkably like Peter. Sometimes I find myself asking the same question Peter did: "What about him?" "What about her?" Jesus would say the same thing to me as he did to Peter: "What is that to you? You must follow me!" I'm wondering though if sometimes Jesus might say it this way, today, right now, in these moments:

Ian, Sue, Sandra, Clare, Denise, Lesley, Marian..... I know everything about you. I choose you as mine, not in spite of everything I know about you, but in the full truth of everything I know about you. I love you with an everlasting love. I have always loved you, I will always love you and I love you now, in these moments, just as much as I ever did.

I love you when you feel good about yourself, I love you when you achieve the successes you dream of. I love you when things are going well and you are able to embrace everything that surrounds you. I love you when you believe you are a failure, that you have let me or those you love down. I love you when things are tough and you are in the depths of despair. I love you when you feel the joy

and exhilaration of being you. I love you when you can see no good in yourself. I love you when life spills forth good things for you. I love you when life has been cruel and you are in the grip of deep and dark pain. I love you when you can smile and sing. I love you when you hide yourself in silence.

And what I most want is to lavish my love upon you. I rejoice in the person you are and I have made you. I love your uniqueness, those things about you that are true only of you. I love that there is, truly no-one else quite like you. I love that. I love your unique mix of gifts and talents, the abilities you have that are distinct from any other person there has ever been and will ever be. I love that when I look at you I see no-one else like you; no-one else smiles like you; no-one else has your laugh. I love that your heart is turned toward me.

I love that we can walk together through the challenges and joys that we will find along the way. I love that my journey with you is like no other journey. I love that we can do this thing together. I want you to know that there will be nothing, absolutely nothing that can separate my love from you. There may be some things that will make it difficult, but there will be nothing that will take away my love or stop me loving you. I'm sorry if I've been a bit blunt, or if I've gone on too long, but I want you to know what I really think about you, yes, you!

Friends, what might God be saying to you in these moments?

On the beach, Jesus speaks truth to Peter and invites him again: "You must follow me!"

About six weeks later Peter is gathered with the other followers of Jesus in a room. Jesus has left them again, this time for a long time. Peter, follower of Jesus, has no idea of what is about to happen. Jesus had told them when he went away the Holy Spirit would come – and that day he did.

A crowd gathered to mock and jeer at these strange, drunk, uneducated fishermen and their hangers on. They wanted to see for themselves what was happening at this boisterous celebration where the wine flowed. They gathered wondering what all this was about. Peter, fisherman, follower of Jesus, understood this was his time. Slowly nervously, he stood and began to speak.

Jesus met Peter on a beach because that's where Peter was. Jesus comes to you, now, in these moments, where you are. Jesus invited Peter to follow him. Jesus is inviting you, as you are, to do the same. Jesus says, simply, to you. "Follow Me!"

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