

Sunday May 5th 2019 John 21:1-19, Acts 9: 1-6

Prayer: Lord God, open our ears, our eyes, and our hearts that we may hear and receive your Word, even Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

I wonder if you have ever felt a failure? You've let yourself down, others down and worst of all God. How can you call yourself a Christian let alone do those things for God you thought he wanted you to do? And perhaps at such times you just don't feel like going on. Prayer is hard and you know that any pretence doesn't work either, as God knows all about it – and you wish he didn't! There seems nowhere to hide.

When I was in that place some years ago I eventually went off on retreat to seek help as I didn't seem able to put things right by myself. I didn't expect the pastoral director to re-focus my mind with this chapter from John. It comes as a surprise that God still has something for our lives despite our failures – and sometimes even a unique ministry maybe because of our failures and shortcomings. God always holds us in love, in his hands, in fact he never gives up on us – and his perspective is so very different from ours!

So what can we learn from this special chapter. I'm sure Peter was still very much in turmoil after denying Jesus. How could he, the one who was so confident that he would follow Jesus even to death, the one who thought that even if everyone else failed he never would, have denied knowing Jesus, not just once but three times and in response to questioning from women! Was he tempted to end to it like Judas – or could there be another way?

Although Jesus had been raised from the dead he wasn't there all the time; he kept appearing and disappearing and no one knew when. So there wasn't really the opportunity to sort this out with him.

When the women had gone back from the tomb on the resurrection morning they had a message that Jesus would meet the disciples in Galilee. And so the disciples headed there – the place where it had all begun. Sometimes it's good to go back to the beginning – to return again to where God has first met us.

But Jesus didn't appear immediately – so what could they do? They couldn't just sit around, although that may have been useful to contemplate the events of the past few days, they had to do something to fill the time and maybe get some income for their families.

So Peter suggests going fishing. That was his life experience up to knowing Jesus and was confident of his abilities. Several other disciples decided to join him. But once again he was confronted with failure. Couldn't he even get that right? They fished all night but caught nothing; absolutely nothing! And without the night's sleep I imagine Peter was feeling all the more despondent.

But then they noticed someone – a stranger - on the shore. Was it the early light that stopped them from recognising him? Surely they hadn't forgotten the one who was always up early to pray. The stranger called out to them, "Friends, have you any fish?" No – we're failures! But maybe he see something from the shore that they were missing? "Cast your net on the right side of the boat".

Although they surprisingly didn't seem to recognise the voice they obeyed the instruction. What was there to lose? They were in for a great surprise! So much so they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish. Someone actually took the time to count them - 153 fish and

they were all **large**!! What a tremendous reminder of the love, mercy and generosity of God. Instead of Jesus criticising them for returning to their old way of life – he just blessed them!

When we go ahead and do things without Jesus we are likely to fail – but when Jesus is at the centre and we do what he asks – then miracles, beyond our imagining, can happen.

No wonder John now recognised this stranger as no less than Jesus himself! Only he could bring miracles and blessing like this. What a vivid reminder of that miraculous catch when he had then asked them to follow him.

And, well there was no stopping Peter. The one who had wanted to go fishing was suddenly no longer interested in all those fish - he just wanted to be with Jesus – the one he had denied knowing! Peter was so impulsive he didn't seem to care about leaving the others struggling to pull in the net. I'm sure it was really frustrating being with Peter at times – but his heart was in the right place.

When they reached the shore there was another surprise awaiting them! Jesus already had a fire burning. Although they had failed that night to catch fish – Jesus somehow had caught some – and had brought some bread. What they needed at that time wasn't a lecture on faith or the need to wait God's timing – they needed breakfast – food and warmth – and then they were ready to hear from him.

But I wonder if the smell of the charcoal and the warmth of the fire reminded Peter of that other fire where he had denied Jesus? Was Peter agitating to talk, to say sorry, to be forgiven? Was he wondering if there was anything on earth that Jesus that would be prepared for him to do now?

Maybe the miracle had also reminded him of that other time – when he had tried so bravely to walk to Jesus on the water - and failed when he saw just how big the storm was? But that time Jesus had grabbed him and held him until he was brought to safety.

It was only when they had finished eating that Jesus said to Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" Was Peter saddened that Jesus had reverted to his old name Simon and not the name he'd given him of Peter – the rock? Perhaps it was the old Simon who had failed and Peter was no more and there was nothing left for him? As Simon he was certainly good at doing things in his own strength and failing.

And what did Jesus mean by "love me more than **these**"? The other disciples? The fishing nets and the boat? And why did Jesus question him about love – rather than obedience? Could it be that following Jesus is all about love – our response to his love for us?

Peter replies humbly – Yes Lord you know that I love you. He no longer makes any claims to being better than the others, or loving Jesus more but simply admits his own love. Three times Jesus asks him the same question. That hurt because of the obvious reminder of his three denials. But the deeper Jesus goes, the greater the healing and the restoration. So three times Peter responds with his love for Jesus.

And the amazing thing is that Jesus doesn't condemn him, criticise him or in any way punish him for the denials – in fact Jesus commissions him with an even greater task. Jesus knew his heart was in the right place.

Peter's first calling had been to become a fisher of men. But now his task was to feed God's lambs and take care of his sheep. Jesus was sharing with him his own role, and that of the Father's, of being the Good Shepherd – who cares for God's own sheep. What a high calling!

Why risk giving it to someone who had failed so dramatically? But God specialises in turning failures around. When, instead of dwelling on our failures, we are focused on him and filled with his Spirit, his overflowing love overwhelms us and anything is possible. But it would come at a great cost – just as it had done for the Good Shepherd himself.

Our first reading was the dramatic change that God brought about in Saul's life from being someone who fought against God to becoming the great apostle Paul. Everyone's experience is different, but when we come to God, admit our failures and seek his forgiveness we find his love overwhelms. We discover that he doesn't hold onto our failures, like we often do, but he changes us and has something unique for our lives to share that love with others.

I'd like us now to listen to a song – entitled "A fragile stone". It goes through Peter's life and how the love of Jesus transformed him. You may like to imagine you are also that stone being held by God.

Song: A fragile Stone – Michael Card

You bore the burden of a name
Along a road that would lead to the cross
Bold and broken, upside-down
A light for the least and the lost

He called you the rock, the foundation
Of a temple formed from God's love
His robe of forgiveness wrapping you up
Meant trusting in Him was enough

His love called you out on the water
And held you when you were alone
For you were the rock that was
Broken by love, forever the fragile stone

His love was the hammer that broke you
By His gentle and powerful hand
The mystery of mercy undid your denials
At last you could finally stand

The door that He opened was freedom
The door that He closed was your fear
Simply to rest in the arms of His love
Made all your doubts disappear

His love called you out on the water
And held you when you were alone
For you were the rock that was
Broken by love, forever the fragile stone

A stone that is dropped in the water
Will vanish and soon disappear

But the waves that move out from the center
In time they will reach everywhere

His love called you out on the water
And held you when you were alone
For you were the rock that was
Broken by love, forever the fragile stone

For you were the rock that was
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Prayer: Thank you Father that your love holds on to us – despite our failures. We offer ourselves back to you and ask you to do in our lives what you long to do. Amen