

### **Easter 3, Year C, 1 May 2022**

Acts 9:1-6, (7-20), Psalm 30, Revelation 5:11-14, John 21:1-19

I have a question for you this morning. It's this: have you ever encountered the Risen Jesus? Well, of course you have. You encounter him in the Eucharist every time we celebrate. So let me rephrase my question. Have you encountered the Risen Jesus strategically? Have you had a personal encounter with him that gives direction to your life?

Because the people in our readings from Acts and John's gospel, did.

Take Ananias for example. His strategic encounter with the Risen Jesus was through a vision in which the Lord gave him very specific instructions about visiting Saul, laying hands on him, and restoring his sight.

Now, we are not told whether this was a daytime or night vision. It doesn't matter. Either way the Lord knew whom to call and even went so far as to make it clear to Ananias that he was to visit Saul of Tarsus, the man with murderous intent persecuting Christians.

Jesus did not call a man who would say "You know, I had the strangest dream the other day where I imagined that Jesus asked me to go and lay hands on Saul of Tarsus. Now how unlikely is that? That is something I shall definitely not be doing."

No, Ananias was so familiar with Jesus (whom he would never have met in the flesh) that he knew – even though it was scary – that this vision was of the Lord. And being that intimate with Jesus Ananias even first engaged in conversation before going.

I wonder how familiar we are with Jesus. Would we recognise his voice if he called us? Are we familiar enough with him to be able to hold a two-way conversation? I am not sure that I am.

But of course, the two main characters in these passages are Saul and Peter. Let's look at Saul first.

Saul is interesting. Because his encounter with the Risen Jesus didn't fundamentally change him at all. He remained the passionate devout follower of God he had always been, utterly committed to seeing God's kingdom come.

But through his encounter with the Risen Jesus - the man he believed to be dead - he was turned around to face in a new direction. But he remained passionate and utterly committed for God.

The man who had been passionate for the truth and the purity of the Jewish faith (because Pharisees believed that this was the means through which the kingdom of God would be ushered in) became passionate about Jesus – and him crucified (1 Cor.2:2) – as the way to forgiveness of sins and the establishment of God's kingdom on earth, now and not just in the future.

Suddenly Saul found that, rather than passionately jail and murder Christians, he would passionately promote the teaching that they championed, even to the extent of being imprisoned, beaten, and facing death himself.

And all it took was a strategic encounter with the Risen Jesus.

So, what about Peter? Altogether a different character. Less threatening but more flawed. More like us.

We could say, in common parlance, that he had a fall from grace at Jesus's trial in the High Priest's house when he denied knowing Jesus three times. But, of course, it was not a fall from God's grace. That was still there for him through Jesus as we heard in the second part of the gospel reading.

I think most of us are familiar with this account of Peter's encounter with the Risen Christ. It appears that Jesus took Peter aside privately and spoke with him.

It was the grace of Jesus that meant a private meeting to spare Peter embarrassment from allusion to Peter's denial. And no doubt Jesus was aware – and may even have planned – that the smell of the charcoal fire on the beach would remind Peter of that cold night around the fire at the High Priest's house when he denied knowing Jesus.

Three times Peter disowned Jesus, despite all his bravado after the Last Supper "Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will." And three times Jesus, the Good Shepherd, commissions Peter to partner with him and shepherd his flock, both by way of expressing forgiveness, and by way of confidence in and commitment to Peter.

So why was Peter hurt, grieved that the Lord asked him three times to answer whether he loved Jesus? Was it because, as Peter says and understands, the Lord already knew that Peter loves him? Or was it that asking the question three times reminded Peter of his three denials of Jesus? Or was it something else?

Jesus and the disciples would have been speaking Aramaic, but John wrote his gospel in Greek. I understand that in Aramaic there is only one verb for love. But in the Greek John uses two different words.

Jesus says "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" And John chooses the word *agape* for love, denoting that selfless concern for another which requires, I quote, 'faithfulness, commitment, and sacrifice', that is, the highest form of love.

Peter replies "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." or "Yes, Lord, you know that I am fond of you." because John uses the word *phileo*, brotherly love.

Scholars tell us that we shouldn't put much store by this; John uses the two words interchangeably throughout his gospel and it may just be a literary device to break up his narrative a bit.

We have the same format in the second question and answer.

But in the third question from Jesus, the one that upset Peter, John has Jesus ask “Simon son of John, are you fond of me?” not “Do you *agape* me?”

What if this is not just a literary device, but John is trying to convey the sense of the moment? What if this is the Risen Jesus meeting Peter, commissioning Peter, just where he is as a person? Jesus has already gone back to the beginning and called him Simon.

What if Jesus is saying, “OK *agape* is not in the frame at the moment, but I can work with that. I am meeting you and commissioning you where you are in your relationship with me right now. That’s OK.”

Well, if Peter is more like us then I suspect that the other fishermen disciples on the beach were even more so. Here they are. They’ve spent three extraordinary years with Jesus. Then a few truly horrific days. They’ve learnt a lot and seen a lot. They’ve grieved. Then comes the dawning realisation that Jesus is alive again.

And then what? Life is in limbo. It’s not the same as it was, even with Jesus alive. So what’s to be done? They go back to the humdrum everyday life of fishing.

But it’s not to be humdrum. The stranger on the shore instigates a miraculous catch of fish and suddenly they realise that even though it’s not the same, Jesus is the same; the power is still there. He is truly, fully alive.

It was profoundly important that they knew that Jesus was risen, alive and powerful. This was a strategic encounter with the Risen Christ. It would undergird their future witness and missionary activity in spreading the good news of the gospel. Peter, Thomas, Nathanael, and John travelled widely doing just that, even going as far as India.

So, I wonder about us. We know that Jesus is alive but what sort of encounter have we had with the Risen Christ? Is it of strategic importance to us?

Are our lives humdrum, unexciting? Do we spend them fishing, as it were? Or is there a real and personal encounter with the Risen Christ impacting on us, driving us forward, impelling us to share the good news of the gospel?

I wonder. We don’t need to be someone other than who we are. Saul and Peter show us that. And we don’t need to have it all together. Peter was still flawed, as we see in Galatians (2|:11-16), but still pursuing Jesus.

And Jesus wants a personal encounter with each one of us too. Will we let him?  
Amen