

St Brandon's, Sermon for 5th May 2019.

Acts 9:1-20, John 21:1-19

Resurrection Appearance

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We are inclined to think that for the disciples, believing in Jesus was easy: they were with him, they saw him, he talked to them first-hand: if only we could do that!

We heard today about the third time in John's Gospel that Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead, having first, appeared to Mary Magdalene at the tomb, when she thought he was the gardener.

That night, he appeared to his disciples locked into their room for fear of the Jews, and said '*Peace be with you*'.

The following week, he appeared again in the shut room, this time Thomas was with them, and he invited Thomas to touch his wounds and believe.

Now he shows himself again, on the lakeside where they are unproductively, trying to fish.

What is common to all these appearances is failure, initially, to recognise him.

In today's story, it states that there were seven disciples in the boat, they were only about a hundred yards from the shore, close enough for Jesus to converse with them. It was after daybreak, so presumably they could see him '*but the disciples did **not know** that it was Jesus*'.

They follow his instruction to cast the net on the right side, and the profusion of fish that results prompts the disciple whom Jesus loved, to say to Peter "*It is the Lord!*"

Now, oddly, it says *'When Simon Peter **heard** that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the lake.'*

There is nothing that suggests that Peter has recognised Jesus himself, he seems to be purely believing and responding in faith and excitement to the other disciple's words.

Even when they have all reached shore and seen the charcoal fire that Jesus has prepared with fish and bread already on it, they say nothing; Peter responds to the instruction "*Bring some of the fish that you have just caught*", then they they all are are invited "*Come and have breakfast*".

Then it says specifically, *'Now none of the disciples dared to ask him "Who are you?" because they knew it was the Lord'*.

Why on earth, would that question even be relevant, if Jesus was recognisably himself?

The impression is, that the fact it *is* the Lord has been becoming apparent to them gradually, and, I can only think, despite appearances to the contrary.

The certainty is now there but they are reluctant to share this 'not knowing/knowing' who he was.

Not immediately recognising him seems a significant aspect of the way the disciples record the experience of meeting the risen Lord.

Each time the risen Lord is met with, the recognition comes after Jesus has revealed himself – shown himself - through some action that changes their understanding of who he is, or their situation.

He reveals himself to them, and they recognise him by, his redeeming work.

Emphatically, and increasingly, not by recognising his face and voice, the person, not in any of the gospel tellings.

It is as if Jesus is becoming, by degrees, visible in and through what appear to be other people.

We know the risen Jesus is recorded as looking real and normal, able to eat and be touched, though with altered/enhanced physicality: he can appear and disappear.

Why not look like the same person as he did, like himself?

What did becoming unrecognisable in his physical features require of his disciples?

What was it achieving?

I wonder if they are being trained into being expectant that they might recognise Jesus in 'the ordinary' and in 'others'?

I wonder if Jesus was trying to help them, and us, follow his transition from human to divine?

(By putting it simply, like that, I'm not meaning to suggest he is not, or was not, fully divine and fully human; it's just easier to follow my thread if we focus on how we perceive him at different times).

The disciples have known Jesus as friend, companion, healer, teacher: with them: incarnate; human.

It is crucial that they make the connection and fully comprehend and believe that the same Jesus, through the process of rising and ascending takes them, and us, up into the divine: Jesus Christ as Lord, fully divine; alive in us and the world spiritually, through the word (scripture) and actions.

His disciples had confidence in him on earth, they must have confidence in him hereafter.

They had their doubts, and we have our doubts, that is containable within the whole, as long as there is connection between the prediction and promise, and the narrative.

If the story is recorded, we can wonder all we like about ‘how?’ And ‘really?’ And, ‘can we believe?’

But if the story is not there for the record, its a much harder task for the generations that follow.

So, I am suggesting that in order to flag up where Christ is going to be found, the resurrected Jesus does not limit himself any longer to the one; already he is showing he can be many, and other.

He is not confined to the person ‘**Jesus**’ but inhabits the **action**: he is identified by characteristic transformative actions not physical features.

His disciples had learnt a lot about who Jesus was while he was with them, they had witnessed miracles of water turned into wine, of the dead brought back to life, they had even, occasionally, declared him to be the Son of God

tentatively, and without comprehension, and its this sort of knowledge of him that the risen Jesus calls on for recognition.

He does not utilise the material things or simple memories:

he doesn't say "Do you remember when I told you ... ?", or, "Do you remember when we ... ?"

Instead, he says or does something that carries a characteristically transformative message and then waits for them to make the connection with his new self.

When the penny drops, he stays around just long enough to reassure them that they have identified him correctly, and fully heard the message he brings them:

The risen Jesus brings a message of peace:

"Peace be with you." when they were locked in fear;
and again, when Thomas has got left behind;

The risen Jesus brings a message of hope and provision:

"Cast the net to the right side and you will find some";

The risen Jesus brings a message of forgiveness:

Simon Peter receives the commission anew *"Follow me"*, having declared three times that he loves Jesus, undoing the pain of his three rejections by an earlier charcoal fire, before a cock crowed;

The risen Jesus brings a message of relationship with him that will be without end, transcending death: *"Mary"*, *"Rabbouni!"* (which means 'teacher').

The disciples had learnt who Jesus is, they had sub-consciously learnt how to recognise him even though their understanding consciously/cerebrally of who he was was necessarily limited; the risen Jesus lets that internal knowledge of him do its work, he did not need to *tell them* who he was. By contrast, Saul, who has been breathing threats and murder against the disciples, when he dramatically meets Jesus on the road to Damascus, has to ask “*Who are you, Lord?*” (Interestingly, its a direct and personal question: ‘*Who are you*’, not, ‘*what are you*’, or ‘*What’s happening to me?*’)

He then fasts and prays in his blindness, and very concrete and physical events are predicted and performed in the shape of Ananias coming in person to lay his hands on Saul so he can regain his sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.

Saul experiences the truth of the risen and ascended Christ with sufficient immediacy that he instantly converts, and proclaims Jesus as the Son of God in synagogues as soon as he has regained strength.

Saul becomes Paul, our greatest teacher in the step of our understanding – or at least, believing - the transition of Jesus incarnate becoming Christ in glory.

Interpreting the disciples’ witness to Jesus’ life, ministry, dying, rising, appearing and ascending; indeed, Paul counted himself the last disciple to meet the risen Lord in person.

What Paul establishes through his meeting with the risen Lord is the knowledge and confidence to proclaim “His Spirit is with us” and to testify to the truth, “His Spirit is in us”.

The church calendar makes us take the same journey as the disciples: we sit for 40 days of Easter, considering the sightings of the risen Lord and receiving the Spirit at Pentacost before we have sufficiently digested the significance of his rising and can acknowledge his ascension to the Father.

In the collect – the prayer for this Sunday, we prayed that, as the disciples were gladdened by the sight of the risen Lord, so may we be given such knowledge of his presence with us, that his risen life might strengthen and sustain us in true service.

I think the disciples’ failure to immediately recognise the risen Lord was for our benefit, to teach us to look for the Spirit of God potentially at work in and through every one of us:

the risen, living Lord is multi-faceted and multi-cultural.

And are we glad!

I think the disciples’ failure to immediately recognise the risen Lord was also to teach us to be confident that we are intended to seek and listen to, our in-dwelling spirit, and let the indwelling Spirit of God transfigure us.

I think the disciples’ failure to immediately recognise the risen Lord allows us a new way of knowing and being in the world, individually and

collectively, as his body on earth: the final, visible manifestation of that risen body.

Amen