

St. Mary's Holy Communion Sunday 10th April 2016

3rd Sunday of Easter

Acts 9:1-20

Revelation 5:11-14

John 21:1-19

we've all been in the situation where someone is telling us a long and rambling story with all sorts of inessential details, and we long for them to get to the point and conclusion of the story!

a rather tedious and verbose man was talking at length to the philosopher, Plato; at last he said, 'I'm not boring you, am I?', to which Plato replied with a smile, 'Oh, not at all – I wasn't listening!'

I hope you *were* listening to those two long readings, from Acts 9 and John 21, although they seem to include so much unnecessary information! here are shortened 'headline' versions: Acts 9 – 'Saul meets Jesus and turns from a persecutor of the church to a fervent disciple'; John 21 – 'Peter meets Jesus and turns from a cowardly failure to a great leader' maybe that just about does it, and we don't need all the rest? I'll come back to that later two weeks ago on Easter Day we thought about *why* we should believe in the resurrection; today our focus is on the *how* – how does it look, to live with the reality of the risen Christ?

both Simon Peter and Saul were 'failures' in their different ways: Peter had abandoned Jesus when he was arrested, and then denied three times he even knew him; Saul had tried to eradicate the infant church; for both of them it was the presence of the risen Jesus that transformed that failure, and set them on new paths with him

both stories are snapshots of the early days and months after the resurrection, showing how people came to terms with this new reality; in Acts 9 we see the community of believers, as they spread out from Jerusalem after the Day of Pentecost; I hesitate to refer to them as 'the church' or even as 'Christians', as these terms were not yet in use; instead we find them referred to variously here: as disciples, as saints, as those who 'invoke the name of Jesus', and those who 'belong to the Way'

they have no organised structures, but they're bound together by this tremendous new idea: that Jesus, the Son of God, has been raised from the dead and is now present to them through his Holy Spirit; they 'belong to the Way', a phrase that captures well this sense of people on the move in a new world; being a 'Christian' then is not about having fixed a set of beliefs, or buildings or hierarchies; it is about being on a journey, with companions, amongst whom crucially is Jesus himself

into this peaceful scene breaks Saul, 'breathing threats and murder'; the contagion of this 'Way' has spread from Jerusalem as far as Damascus – no mean distance, several days' journey on horseback – so Saul heads there to stamp it out

interestingly, the 'Christian network' has been busy and already word has reached the believers in Damascus of Saul's intentions; hence Ananias' reluctance to have anything to do with him

but by the end of this long story (and all its little details are perhaps a sign that this crucial turning-point in the life of the church was told and retold many times?) – Saul has been ‘converted’, he too has become part of the Way, and to everyone’s astonishment is announcing Jesus as the Son of God in the synagogues

but perhaps the emphasis we tend to put on Saul’s *conversion* here is a bit one-sided; just as important – certainly for the rest of the Book of Acts – is his *commissioning* to ‘bring Jesus’ name before Gentiles, kings and the people of Israel’; yes, he has a change of *heart*, but he also has a complete change of *direction*

the passionate commitment that drove Saul to persecute the church is now what takes him across the Roman Empire with the message of the Gospel; he must ‘suffer much for the sake of Jesus’ name’, but he is ready to obey; the question for us is: do we hear and obey *our* call? we may have been *converted*, but have we been *commissioned*?

now rewind to John 21, for a snapshot of the disciples in a state of confusion just after the resurrection; what are they to do with themselves now, without Jesus beside them every day? 7 of the 11 disciples are back in their old haunts by Lake Galilee, or the Sea of Tiberias; and I imagine they’ve been sitting around, arguing about what to do, when Simon Peter breaks in with, ‘I’m going fishing’; fair enough, if in doubt, do what you know best!

but even that ends in failure, as they work all night and catch nothing – even the safe, familiar old job just doesn’t work anymore, without Jesus; he only needs to appear on the shore and tell them to put their nets down on the other side, and suddenly failure is transformed into fruitfulness, in a great catch of fish

there are so many details here: Peter’s nakedness, the distance from the shore, the charcoal fire, the precise number of fish caught, the intimate conversation between Jesus and Peter; some scholars claim that this extra chapter, tacked on the end of John’s gospel, cannot be authentic; but to me it rings true, it has that ‘eye-witness’ quality of so much of John

we hear how Jesus ‘undoes’ Peter’s three denials with his three questions, ‘Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?’; he draws out from Peter a confession of love that is humble and realistic, but also deeply felt; and on that foundation Jesus can re-commission Peter as leader and shepherd of his disciples: ‘Follow me!’, Jesus says; ‘Feed my sheep!’

yes, there will be suffering, even death, ahead on this new road, but there’s also the promise of Jesus’ constant presence on the way; Peter is going to learn what it means to live with the resurrection, with the risen Christ

I have told this story before but some may not have heard it, how when I came for interview here in Langley 10 years ago, and was offered the post of vicar, I was not at all sure that this was the right place for me; I spent a very restless night, knowing that I’d have to give an answer the next morning

as I prayed and agonised over this decision, God brought to mind this conversation between Peter and Jesus; I heard the question addressed to me, ‘Robin, do you love me?’, and then the commission, ‘Feed my sheep’; and I knew that God was saying to me that here, at St. Mary’s, Langley, were the sheep that he wanted me to feed

obedience to that sense of calling has sustained me through some tougher times; as Josh & Nina Cleaver were saying last week, about their call to mission in Ukraine: though it may seem difficult or illogical to others, obeying God's call is the safest and most joyous place to be

we are all different; you are not Peter or Saul, and you are not me; we are all different, and each of us has our own individual call; to each of us Jesus says, 'Do you love me? do you love me? do you love me?'; and if we can answer, however hesitantly, 'Yes, Lord, you know that I love you, or at least I'm trying!', he then says to us, 'Follow me', and he commissions us to do his work, to be his hands and feet, his voice and heart

so, how does it look, to live with the reality of the risen Christ? probably pretty scary? yes! we wonder, 'what is he going to ask of me next?'

but the point is, we can do what he asks because the risen Lord Jesus walks beside us, and because, oddly enough, he *believes in us*; as he believed in Peter and Saul, unpromising material though they may have seemed, he believes also in you and me!

may we be open and willing to hear his call and to obey it, whatever that may mean