

John 21:1-25

Full nets that never break

Christ Church Liverpool

There are lots of scholars in the world who are much happier with John 20 than with John 21. Whether they believe the accounts of the resurrection in the flesh of Jesus Christ from the dead or not, and most of them don't, they simply cannot understand why John would want to add another conclusion to the one he already has. After all, people say, v30 and 31 of chapter 20 seem like a great end to a book:

“Jesus did many other miraculous signs which are not recorded in this book. But these are written so that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you might have life in his name.”

Why would you want another ending? One that at first sight seems so much less glorious and impressive than Thomas' wonderful confession of Christ as “my Lord and my God” and Jesus blessing on all those who, like anyone who is a Christian here today, believes in Jesus Christ without having physically seen him resurrected.

Because of this many writers have, in recent years, been prone to dismiss chapter 21 as either not the work of the apostle John who wrote the rest of the book or to say that he wrote it later, in more advanced years, and was, perhaps, losing his touch a bit as a writer.

In fact, though, we can be confident that this chapter is by the apostle John and is part of his original plan for what to include in his account of the life of Christ. Firstly because there's no known ancient manuscript of John's gospel that doesn't have chapter 21 – it has always been there. But, more than that, this chapter is an integral part of the story. It ties up some important loose ends that, if you've read the rest of the gospel you might well want to know about...

And it also answers a fundamental question that the resurrection story in chapter 20 should make us want to ask. The question is this: in the light of Jesus' resurrection what should his disciples do? Or, to put it another way, *if Jesus Christ is really alive how should Christians live?*

For there are plenty of ordinary people who, just like the scholars, would be content to stop at the end of chapter 20. The resurrection of Jesus gives them a sense of hope that they could never know without that event. They are genuinely convinced that he was not snuffed out, that the tomb was empty and that this historical event means that death is not the end for us. But that's it. For many people, perhaps for some of us here today, the resurrection is a bare fact. It's true. It's encouraging. But, from day-to-day, it doesn't really make much difference to what we do.

Well John does not want us to stop reading at the end of chapter 20. And he does not want us to shape our lives round the end of chapter 20 either – as glorious and wonderful and reassuring as the truths taught there are.

John wants his first readers, Christians living within half a century of these events, to go to the end of chapter 21 and live a life that is shaped by the reality of the resurrection. And God the Holy Spirit, speaking today through these words of John, wants us to do that too.

So, this morning, in this passage we're going to see four things that Christians will do because Jesus is risen.

1 **Fish (for those God miraculously gives) v1-14**

A friend of mine is having some real trouble with an employer at the moment and was trying to decide what they ought to do about it. So I went to the bookshop with them and got a book on Employment Law and sat down to try and summarise for them what the current situation of the law is so that they could decide whether it is worth getting a solicitor and taking the case further.

It is 13 years and 24 days since, shortly before my final exam, I looked at a law text book. And do you know what? It's amazing how easily you get back into it. Something that has been so familiar to you, even if it was quite a long time ago, if it's in your memory and your skill set, just comes back really naturally.

I imagine that's pretty much how the disciples felt as they returned to Galilee. They had to eat. They knew fishing. *Let's go fishing!* Seven of them, possibly a number recorded by John to show that they represent all of Jesus' disciples, set off... But things don't turn out so well...

John tells us that they were fishing at night. Just like chapter 20 this chapter begins in darkness. Then it was the darkness of grief and fear because, for all they knew, Jesus was gone forever and his mission was at an end. Now it is a darkness of confusion because they simply don't know what they're meant to be doing. They know that Jesus is alive. They are excited and delighted and overjoyed by the reality of his return from the grave. But they don't really have a clue where to go from here. They don't catch anything. Even this mundane and ordinary activity, that the disciples knew so well and were totally unfamiliar with, has been, in some way, closed off to them. They just can't do it any more.

And, once again, v4, it is only with the coming of Jesus that light dawns. At first he seems like just a bloke on the shore. Perhaps he struck the disciples as the kind of annoying person who, likes to watch other people working and give advice. Or perhaps they thought that, from a different vantage point in the early morning light, he could see a shoal of fish that wasn't visible to them. Anyway whether in hope or irritation they pull the nets in and chuck them out again on the other side of the boat. And suddenly the net is bulging and straining and slipping through their hands, because of the size of the massive haul of fish.

In the end it's the miracle, the sign, that gives away Jesus' identity. In chapter 20 it was his voice calling Mary by name. Then when he first saw the disciples it was the wounds from the cross. And now it's a miracle of provision that opens John's eyes to the identity of the man standing on the shore in the growing light.

And, as usual, if John works it out first Peter responds first. He was probably fishing in the nude. So he wraps his loin cloth round him, dives into the water and starts a 100m dash for shore – leaving his mates to struggle with the fish and the boat! Actually this turns out not to be the best decision Peter ever made because from John's account it seems like Peter and the boat get to shore at pretty much the same time.

I think it's a most astonishing scene – Jesus, the risen Lord of glory, is pootling around with a fire he's obviously made quite a lot earlier which has already gone down to embers enough to bake bread and cook some more fish that Jesus has already caught, who knows how. "Come on lads," he says, "breakfast's up". "Oh and bring a few more of those fish – you look pretty hungry!" "Man there's a lot to choose from," says one of the disciples. "I wonder how many?" asks someone else. "I'll count them", says whichever one was the geek of the bunch. Several minutes later, "153 – can you believe that?!"

As you can imagine much ink has been spilled over what the deep and hidden symbolism of 153 might be. In fact, to be honest, it probably would have been better if the ink really had been spilled – down a drain say – than wasted on some of the ridiculous suggestions that it has been – such as that 153 is the triangular number of 17 (what you get when you add 1 plus 2 plus 3 etc all the way to 17) and that 17 is the number of the 10 commandments plus the number of the trinity plus the number of Jerusalem. Well I mean, obviously. Some people really should get out more!

And it misses some much, much more obvious and important things. Firstly there are a lot of fish! Loads and loads and loads of fish. Secondly Jesus provides the fish – he brings them into the net. Thirdly, and John specifically draws our attention to this as if it's something surprising – and since I don't know much about the load bearing capabilities of ancient Galilean fishing nets I'll take his word for it that it is surprising – the nets didn't break.

Most Christians through history have understood the fish to represent the people of many nations and the net to represent the kingdom of God that has space and capacity for all – and in fact Jesus told a parable with the net as a symbol of God's kingdom.

So what's the point of the story? Well, the kind of fishing these men were going to be doing from now on, seeking men and women from all nations to come into the kingdom, wasn't going to be possible on their own. Without Jesus they would catch nothing. But following his commands would bring the net of the kingdom full to bursting.

The first implication for Christians of the resurrection is that they should go about the business of working for Jesus' kingdom by **fishing**. By constantly looking for people of all nations to come under the rule of king Jesus and into his kingdom.

2 **Shepherd (the sheep that Jesus has called) v15-17**

I wonder if Peter had anticipated that this conversation would have to happen? If he had that sense of a vague unease as he anticipated the painful chat that was inevitably going to come? Maybe. Or maybe Jesus' words here came as a complete surprise to him. Either way Jesus opening must have caught him off guard. "Simon, son of John" – that's his old name. His identity from before he met Jesus. Jesus is speaking to him like he's not a disciple at all. Like he is, in some way, starting again. And, of course, in a sense he is. Because for Peter one of the key lessons he needs to learn from the resurrection is that he is dependent on Jesus in a way that Jesus never has been or will be on him.

Back in chapter 13 John has recorded Peter as saying that he would lay down his life for Jesus. But when the hour of testing came Peter wouldn't even admit that he'd met Jesus. So Jesus rebuilds Peter from the ground up, as Peter begins to understand what it means that it was Jesus who had to die for him.

"Do you truly love me more than these?" **These** could refer to the fishing tackle lying around – do you want to follow me and participate in my mission more than you want to go on with your old life? But I think it's more likely to refer to the other disciples who, no doubt, are listening intently to the conversation. Peter's humiliating denials were, no doubt, known to them all. So, now, will be his wonderful reinstatement. The other gospel writers record that one of Peter's boasts before the hour of the cross was that even if everybody else deserted Jesus he would not. I love you more, the unspoken thought behind those words.

But Peter has learned that lesson. No longer boasting either in his superior love or his own self-awareness – both of which were proved by the events of that Thursday night to be illusions – he is content to simply affirm his love and, even more than that, Jesus' knowledge of his love.

Three times Jesus asks him, Peter realising with pain in his heart, that these mirror the three times when he was asked if he knew Jesus and said that he did not. Peter is hurt, v17, not because Jesus asks the question – but because he knows that the question has to be asked. It is his own conscience that grieves him.

But the task that Jesus gives him is glorious, isn't it? From the one who denied that he had even met Christ to being charged with doing the job Jesus himself did – the good shepherd has recruited an under-shepherd. The sheep, little lambs, fragile and vulnerable, remain Christ's. But Peter is asked to help Christ care for them.

Some parts of the church have made a big deal about Peter's role here. And said that Peter acquires rights of

primacy and governance in the church. Rights that, the Roman Catholic church maintains, continue to be held by the Bishop of Rome, the Pope, to this day. But what happens to Peter here doesn't make him the leader over the other apostles. And it certainly doesn't make him the first of a special and select band within the church.

In one sense this episode is unique to Peter – nobody else, not even any of the other apostles, receives this commission. Peter is to look after the sheep that Jesus calls by name in a way that nobody else ever will. How did he do it? Well by being the figure behind the first written account of Jesus' life – Mark's gospel, and, of course by writing two letters himself. Peter feeds Jesus sheep by telling us about Jesus through his words.

But in another sense this episode is much more universal than something just for the popes of Rome. At a very obvious level the commission is for anyone with leadership responsibilities in a local church. Peter himself uses very similar language in one of his letters...

"To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow-elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed. Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care... not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you but being examples to the flock. And when the chief shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away."

More widely even than that, the command to shepherd applies to every Christian with any degree of responsibility for others. Whether that's your 1-to-1, housegroup or friends and family members.

Lots of things could say about that. But one of the most important is that if you are a part of our church family here, whenever you are in need of any sort, one of first ports of call should be shepherds – those who have a responsibility for you within the local church, and, especially, the elders. Phone numbers and e-mails on back of notice sheet are not there for decoration. To be used by you!

These are the great tasks of the church – fishing for new people who will come under the gentle rule of Christ and shepherding those whom Christ has called.

Local churches so often emphasise one or the other – evangelism or discipleship, outreach or pastoral care. Jesus wants both. Because both are things that Christians will do because he is risen.

But they won't be without cost. For the third thing we will do because Christ is resurrected is...

3 Die (like Christ to glorify God) v18-19

We might not recognise Jesus' description of what will happen to Peter as a crucifixion. I suspect stretching out your hands and someone else dressing and leading you sounds more like the effects of dementia than an execution to most Western ears.

But to the C1st reader the idea of your arms being stretched and being led would have spoken of the Roman practice of tying the condemned man's arms to his cross and then making him carry it to the place of execution as clearly as us saying "they'll put you up against a wall and blindfold you" would suggest a firing squad.

Peter had been all too keen to voice his willingness to die for Jesus before the cross. Then Jesus had told him that he could not. Because Christ had to die for Peter before that disciple, or any of us, could be free to do anything for God.

But now the cross and the resurrection has come. Now, through his death, Jesus has paid the price for our sin and, through his resurrection, defeated the sentence of death that hung over the human race.

Now those who believe in Jesus can live, even though they die. And that means that dying for Christ is no longer folly and pride, as it would have been for Peter, even if he'd gone through with it. Now dying for Christ is, v19, a way to bring glory to God.

Now that Jesus has done what he had to do on the cross, Christians can follow the path of suffering and death, not just with confidence that the tunnel has been dug and there is light and freedom on the other side.

More than that if we are following Jesus we can face even death knowing that, just as Christ brought glory to his heavenly Father by not shrinking from the cross, so too Christians who die in the path of following Christ will glorify God by their obedience.

This morning, of course, none of us sitting in this safe and moderately comfortable room feels that death for following Christ is a likely outcome. But then perhaps, up in Galilee, miles from the persecuting authorities in Jerusalem, with a belly full of newly baked bread and fish fresh from the lake Peter didn't feel in that much imminent danger either. In fact it would be probably 34 years before Peter actually had to pay the ultimate price – crucified, like the one he followed, by the emperor Nero in the first great persecution of Christians across the Roman world. Peter lived with the knowledge that this would be his fate for half a lifetime. Jesus told him what the price would be. He commanded him to follow, v19, and Peter did.

We don't have such insight into the future. God may see fit to reveal to you that you too will die early specifically because of your following of Christ.

But he probably won't do that. Most Christians in history have not suffered death for their faith. And we should be thankful for that! And we should recognise that we probably won't either. But every one who follows Jesus must be prepared to die.

The future for Christ Church and its people may be fruitful and glorious. There may be many thousands who get converted in this city and change the whole shape of its culture and values. Or we may carry on as at present seeing sadly smaller numbers repenting their sin and

joining the kingdom, but permitted to live quiet and peaceful lives by the authorities. Or we may be persecuted. Our absolute conviction about the uniqueness of Christ may be clamped down upon by law. Our preaching might be curtailed, our jobs under threat and our safety jeopardised.

Who knows what wicked anarchy our country might descend into if the world runs short of food or fresh water. If the power of radical Islam continues to rise.

Death for being a Christian is not as far fetched as it might seem. And that's just for those of us who stay. What about those who are considering taking the gospel overseas? Where are there few missionaries? Where it's dangerous. Saudi Arabia, Bhutan, Iran, the Maldives, Yemen, Turkey. We already know missionaries in some of those countries. If enough of us join them – and I hope that some of us will because the people of those countries are terribly oppressed by wicked false religions – then some of them will certainly be martyred for Christ.

Christians who know Christ is risen will die like him and, so doing, bring glory to God. Fourthly and finally Christians who believe in the resurrection of Christ will...

4 Witness (to the finished but endless deeds of Christ) v20-25

The apostle John wasn't martyred, as far as we know. Certainly he lived longer than Peter – because whilst he must still be alive to write it seems Peter is already dead.

In fact, based on a misunderstanding of what Jesus said in response to Peter's question, it seems some thought John was going to be alive until the return of Christ – something that perhaps attracted feverish speculation as John got older and older and people felt the day must be very near.

Eventually, it seems, John felt he had to publicly make clear that this is not what Jesus meant. The writing of this gospel made for the perfect opportunity to do that.

Jesus' reply is actually a gentle rebuke to Peter. Even now, having not only seen Jesus alive from the dead and been restored by him, Peter hasn't got it all right. He's still, like us, too concerned with other people's business – a pattern that seems to have continued throughout his life and that many Christians still need to guard against today.

You just get on and follow me, Jesus says to Peter. And don't worry what anyone else's role in my great project is.

But John, years later, does know what his own role was. Not to remain until Jesus returned. But to remain long enough to give testimony to all the things that Jesus had done in his presence.

If Peter was going to glorify God in his untimely death, John was going to do so in old age through his writings.

John bears witness to the reality of Jesus Christ through his book. He knows, v25, that his slim volume records not even a billionth of the deeds of Christ, creator, sustainer and saviour of the world.

But his testimony, v24, is true. And it is written for the highest and noblest reason that anybody can have for anything they do – to bring glory to God and help others know Jesus.

Of course the deeds of Christ on earth are no more. His resurrected body has left the planet, not to return until the end of this age.

Not one of us can add to John's story because there are no more works of Jesus to write about.

And yet, in another sense, his deeds are endless. Endless because his voice still sustains the stars and planets. His will still gives every human each heartbeat. His sovereign rule still stands over everything you can see and everything you can't.

His deeds are endless too because each new generation needs to hear for itself the marvellous works of the days when Christ walked the earth. His saving work on the cross is finished, as he himself proclaimed there. But it is also unfinished because it needs to be applied to every one of his sheep that have yet to hear his voice.

This morning, if you are a Christian, you cannot add to John's words. There is nothing new to say about Christ's rescue and the life that believing in him brings.

But you can proclaim those words to people who have not heard them before. That is exactly why John wrote this book. And you can witness to the effect those words, and that life, has had on your own life.

You can do that as a shepherd – nourishing those who know Jesus with the words of life. I wonder how you're going to do that this week?

Perhaps you're a mum. Is there some way you can encourage your children in following Jesus this week that's more than just the usual Bible story before bed?

Perhaps you're a housegroup leader. Will a perfunctory look through the book we're studying at the moment do or are you going to be praying for your group that this week you'll really get to grips with the testimony of the apostles to the wonders of Jesus?

Perhaps there are some other Christians in your house. Will the endless deeds of Christ, sustaining and encouraging you by his word and Spirit make an appearance in your conversations this week?

You can witness as a shepherd.

And you can witness as a fisherman. Introducing people who do not know Jesus to the wonders of his death and resurrection as recorded by John.

I wonder how we can do that this week?

Perhaps you're working in an office. Are you asking Jesus day by day that some of those fish swimming around out there will turn out to be sheep who recognise his voice and turn to trust him?

Perhaps you're working for Christ Church or some other church or Christian organisation. Are we really praying that as we go out Jesus will miraculously bring people in to the net of the kingdom?

Perhaps you feel you're rubbish at talking to people about Jesus. Are you, like John, just getting on with telling the truth and not stressing about the fact that you don't know every answer to every question?

Whatever your situation if you believe in Jesus' resurrection God wants four things from you.

Fish

Shepherd

Die

Witness

Some scholars might prefer to finish at the end of chapter 20. John wants us to go all the way to the end of chapter 21.

Andrew Evans

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