

The God of Surprises - Breakfast on the Beach

John 21:1-25

Introduction:-

We all love surprises, and even like to plan surprises for others as life goes on. After the two resurrection appearances of Jesus to the disciples as a group in John 20:19-23, 24-29, one may wonder whether any further appearances were necessary. However, Mark 16:7 provides a vital clue when the angel at the empty tomb says to the women: "But go, tell his disciples and Peter, He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you." And so this would account for Peter's presence back in Galilee with some of the disciples, and it would therefore be natural that they would occupy themselves with what they could handle and knew best, namely fishing, whilst they were waiting for Jesus. However, it didn't go quite to plan, because though night-time was the best time for fishing, they caught nothing. This situation then creates a replay of a former fruitless night of fishing, followed by the intervention of Jesus at Luke 5:4-11. Interestingly, this former situation, finally resulted in Peter, together with James and John, the sons of Zebedee, leaving all, including their boats, to follow Jesus. And now, all three are again present here, together with four others. And so, this account in John's Gospel now provides the sequel to that earlier event, and shows us how Jesus would also come to us today, in directing our paths according to His love and plans for us.

1. First, we begin with a Surprise for Seven of the Disciples (verses 1-14)

At the end of this passage (v.14) we learn that this was the third time that Jesus had appeared to His disciples after his resurrection from the dead. This has particular symbolical significance for the threefold restitution of Peter to follow, and perhaps the appearance to seven disciples on this occasion also has further symbolical significance for John, for he uses this number throughout the gospel for different categories and things, especially representing the "new creation" in a seven day scheme firstly climaxing at 2:1-12 with the miracle of the "new wine" as the first sign at the wedding feast of Cana in Galilee, in which his glory is also first seen. This then anticipates the seven days of the final week of the Passion (12:1-28) which climaxes at the Cross, where Jesus' glory is finally and fully revealed, thus bringing about a "new creation" through his death and resurrection. And so, in addressing seven disciples only in this section, John may be presenting "all" of Jesus' followers as the nucleus of a "new creation", who will in turn bring this about through the power of God's Spirit, as Jesus first pointed this out to Nicodemus in John 3:1-21 (= "You must be born again"; cf. 2 Corinthians 5:17 = "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: the old has gone, and the new is here"). This would add a new challenge and dimension to the way in which Jesus originally called his disciples to become "fishers of men" (Luke 5:10). We may now note some of the further details of this passage. First, it was Peter who took the lead in suggesting that they go fishing (v.3). The impetuous Peter is often presented as taking the lead in many things that happen, including being the first to enter the tomb (20:6), and the first to jump into the water to come to Jesus (21:7), and finally the first to drag the net of fish to the shore (v.11; which may anticipate Peter's fruitful ministry at Pentecost); whereas the Beloved disciple John is presented as more intuitive, visionary, understanding, and believing, within these same contexts in which Peter features (20:8; 21:7). Finally when Jesus from the shore shows them how to catch some fish after a fruitless night fishing (throw the net on the right side of the boat), they made a huge haul of 153 large fish, which they were unable to haul in - shades of Luke 5:7 and the two boatloads of fish that began to sink. When they landed on the shore, they found a further surprise. A fire of burning coals, with fish on it, and some bread. This recalls the fire in the courtyard at John 18:18 that Peter stood by at night, when he denied the Lord three times. And now the Lord was

inviting Peter and the disciples to warm themselves by Jesus' fire, not only in order to find warmth and nourishment for their bodies, but also friendship and forgiveness for their souls. But even apart from this, here was a little glad surprise - not a necessity as with the feeding of the five thousand at John 6:1-15, where bread and fish were also involved. Jesus even asked them for some of their fish which he himself provided, in order to make them feel a real part of this surprise. This surprise also resembles the wine gift at the Wedding feast of Cana of Galilee, when the wine and life of the wedding feast threatened to come to an end. Jesus unexpectedly stepped in, and asked that the six jars be filled with water which the wedding hosts had to provide, before the miracle of new wine could be finally provided for all. And yet, it still remained a real surprise gift!! And so, we are confronted with a God who also plans surprises for us along life's pathways. This is also called the anticipatory love of God that was present in creation itself, and is supremely found in the Cross where God's love and glory are seen for John (3:16; 12:28; 13:31). This surprise breakfast also reinforced the disciples' understanding that the resurrection was physical and not just spiritual, especially in the light of the previous word to Thomas at 20:29:- Then Jesus told him: "Because you have seen me, you have believed: Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have believed." This is our resurrection challenge and blessing today. We believe in Him, even though we have not seen Him!!

2. Secondly, we continue with a Surprise for Peter (verses 15-19)

Already we have noted the message of Mark 16:7, informing us that Peter would receive the special attention of Jesus in His resurrection appearances. Great trauma and failure requires great comfort and restoration. The Angel's words were:- "Tell the disciples "and Peter" that he goes before you into Galilee." What grace, love, comfort, acceptance, forgiveness, and reassurance, are embodied in these words "and Peter." And to these six things, we can add a seventh one here - recommission. Three times Jesus asked Peter whether he "loved" him (note that the word "love" is actually mentioned seven times in this interview - "love" is the foundation of God's new creational work; John 3:16). And there was a reason for this threefold questioning from Jesus. It was three times that Peter had denied his Lord by the fire in the High Priest's courtyard, and it was three times that his Lord gave him the chance to affirm his love for Jesus' by the beachside fire, with the smell of charcoal fire still lingering in his nostrils. Jesus, in His gracious forgiveness, gave Peter the chance to wipe clean the memory of the threefold denial by a threefold declaration of love. Each answer also sought to evoke from Peter a fresh requirement to exercise responsibility as a Shepherd of God's people. In verse 15 he was first commanded to provide spiritual nourishment for new believers (lambs), followed then in verse 16 at the centre by shepherding/pastoral care for believers generally (sheep), finally concluding at verse 17 with spiritual nourishment for believers generally (sheep). The words at the beginning of verse 15: "Do you love me more than these"? can probably be best understood as: "Do you love me more than these other disciples do" (with Good News Bible) with particular reference to John 13:36-38 where Peter was the only disciple to confess his willingness to follow Jesus all the way to death. Now with his threefold denial behind him, and his threefold restoration before him, Peter was now in the position to actually fulfil Jesus' words at 13:36. That being said, the words, "Do you love me more than these"? are not entirely inappropriate as also applying to Peter's former life of boats and fishing. In other words, applying also to the earthly treasures that we often cling so tightly to (One recalls here the story of the Rich Young Ruler at Luke 18:18-27 whose quest was for eternal life, but his treasures kept him from following Jesus). For Peter this wasn't earning forgiveness or somehow making up for what he had done. Rather, Peter was being trusted afresh, and that is the nature of grace. Further, he was sharing in Jesus' own Shepherd ministry as an extension of that ministry. This had no doubt left an indelible mark upon Peter, as he later addresses church elders to shepherd God's flock in his letter at 1 Peter 5:1-4. And both of his letters can be seen as living examples of seeking to provide

nourishment and pastoral care toward the recipients of his letters. It must also be said of Peter, that his road to eventual spiritual power and fruitfulness was only made possible through a process of denial, failure, and weakness, through which time the Lord was gradually shaping him to understand what it means to understand the sinner. Perhaps Peter's secret is best expressed at 1 Peter 5:6 - "Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, in order that in due time he may exalt you." The valley of humility and failure is the necessary step toward restitution and fruitful service. Finally in this passage, Peter is told that he will finally glorify God through the same path that Jesus took in death itself. One could say, the ultimate path of humility and final glory. As with Jesus' story, the path to glory in John's Gospel is paved with obedient suffering and death.

3. Thirdly, and finally, we conclude with a surprising word from Jesus about the Beloved Disciple (verses 20-24)

In a way, it was not surprising that Peter was concerned about the other disciple with whom he was so closely associated in the gospel of John. In answer to Peter's question, "Lord, and what about him", after learning about his own fate, Jesus replied, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me" (v.22). Then verse 23 clears up the rumour that Jesus may have meant that this disciple will never die until the day of Jesus' second return to earth. And so the words "If I want him to remain" was not a prediction that the beloved disciple would not die, for Jesus only said, "If I want him to remain alive until I come, what is that to you? You must follow me." The important point here is that each and every person must concentrate on following Jesus for themselves, for God has a particular will and purpose for each and every believer, which may be quite different from each other, even though we may sometimes become more interested in how God might be leading someone else, rather than concentrating upon ourselves. The command to concentrate on following Jesus for ourselves is repeated in verses 19 and 22. How well do we find ourselves doing this today? Our glory is never found in comparison with others; rather, our glory is found in the service of Christ, in whatever capacity this has been allotted to us.

Conclusion:-

Finally, it was not for nothing that the Beloved disciple John finally wrote this Gospel, not only for the purpose that everyone who reads this Gospel might believe in Jesus as the Son of God, and by so doing find eternal life in His name (20:31). This was John's great contribution to following Jesus, who sought to make the truth both profound and attractive through the written word. But John also wrote this Gospel in order to show Peter as the Great Shepherd of Christ's people. And here is where we can follow in the steps of Peter. As William Barclay (Gospel of John Vol 2, p. 332) has put it, "We may not be able to think like John; we may not be able to go to the ends of the earth like Paul; but each one of us can guard some from going astray (like lost sheep), and each one of us can feed the lambs of Christ with the food of the Word of God" (end of quote). And like Peter, we will also find the joy and surprise of a beachside fire and breakfast as we journey with our Lord. Amen