

In the detail

10 4 16

Almighty Father,
who in your great mercy gladdened the disciples
with the sight of the risen Lord:
give us such knowledge of his presence with us,
that we may be strengthened and sustained
by his risen life
and serve you continuously in righteousness and truth.

Our text may be found in the gospel according to John, chapter 21 and verse 11:

‘So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish,
a 153 of them, and though there were so many, the net was not torn.’

Today’s passage I’m sure you know well. It’s one of the post resurrection appearances of Jesus. Simon Peter and six other disciples have gone fishing on the Sea of Galilee, spent the night without catching anything, then in the morning, a stranger on the shore tells them to cast their net to the right. They do and net 153 fish ! The stranger is Jesus. They come ashore, eat with him the breakfast he’s cooked for them, then three times Jesus asks Peter if he loves him and three times Peter says he does and all is well again.

So much for the summary but, today, let me simply focus on the detail; four snippets of curious information, one for each paragraph of our gospel reading.

In the boat with Peter are six other disciples. I'm glad to say that this time Thomas is one of them. Two others named are James and John, the sons of Zebedee. One is our patron saint, Nathaniel of Cana, and two are unnamed. Since Nathaniel is in the boat, I'd like to think one of the others not named was his friend, Philip. Nathaniel is only mentioned twice by name in John's gospel: once here at the end where we learn that Nathaniel comes from Cana and once at the start when Philip brings him to Jesus. So Nathaniel is named at the beginning and at the end !

In the boat, Peter is naked. When Peter realises that it is in fact Jesus that is standing there on the shore, he gets dressed before jumping into the water to swim ashore to meet him. Now two things are odd here. One that Peter is stripped for work - I thought Jews were reluctant to be naked in public - and it is quite early in the day when it wouldn't have been that warm - I'm guessing. The other is that Peter actually gets dressed to swim ashore. We normally strip off to swim and, in the old days before swimming trunks, young men wouldn't have thought twice about swimming naked.

In the boat, in the net, are 153 fish. Now I can understand they counted them and I can understand, given the remarkable number, that John should tell us how many there were - after all he was there at the time and had a share in the catch. But is there something significant in the number - has it a deeper spiritual meaning ? Well I'm not into numerology but 153 might allude to the number of species fish then thought to be extant and, therefore, signify that all may be taken

up in the net of salvation. 153 is a curious number: if you're good at mental arithmetic, then you could work out for yourself that 153 is the sum total of:

$$17 + 16 + 15 + 14 + 13 + 12 + 11 + 10 + 9 + 8 + 7 + 6 + 5 + 4 + 3 + 2 + 1$$

Now that's a fact but does 153 mean anything spiritually? Well, there are other even more amazing explanations which I won't bore you with now but simply the large number of fish feels that symbolically, all of us, have the possibility of being saved.

Lastly, let's turn our attention from the boat to the shore where there is a charcoal fire. In Greek, the phrase that the Authorised Version translates as a 'fire of coals' is ανθρακια (anthrakia). Now what grabs my attention is John's attention to detail. The fire over which Jesus has cooked the breakfast fish is the same type of fire (John 18 v18) that was warming the servants in the courtyard of the High Priest's house the night of Jesus' arrest and trial, darkness when Peter three times denies that he knows Jesus. Can you remember the distinctive smell of a coal fire? My mum was a miner's daughter and, in the old days, our kitchen and living room fires were coal and I can still recall the smell of the smoke. It is against the background of this fire, with the distinctive smell of the smoke, possibly recalling to Peter his shameful denial, that Peter is given the chance to reaffirm his faith in, his love for Jesus. Peter understandably may well have been terrified, afraid that night, but now, in the light of morning, in the presence of Jesus, three times Peter can now say he loves Jesus more than anyone. By a charcoal fire, Peter denied Jesus; now by a charcoal fire, Peter stands forgiven.

So this morning, I hope that these four tiny snippets of detail help to show you how real and how special our faith is. That which we believe is truly rooted in truth.

I have spoken in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

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G: Sermons 33 :In the detail

