Acts 9: 1-6; Revelation 5: 11-end; John 21: 1-19

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

Having spent the inside of this past week resolutely not thinking about theology – except insofar as I walked the Cornish coast path remembering the conversations I had in those same places, with myself and with God, as I came to believe in my calling to be a priest –

but, yes, not thinking about theology… when I sat down yesterday to consider today’s readings, I came back down to earth with the most almighty crash!

There seemed to be so many directions to run in with this gospel passage that it was hard to know where to start.

Hot on the heels of Thomas, the doubter who really wasn’t, we have the story of Peter, the denier who was but also sort of wasn’t. Certainly, Peter has been sore misinterpreted on occasion.

Peter is characterised right through the gospels by his failure to engage his brain before he opens his mouth – and how many of us do the same? Peter is impulsive and he is rash. When Jesus offered a foot washing, Peter wanted a full body bath. When Peter wanted to defend Jesus in the Garden, he cut off Malchus’ ear before even consulting Jesus about what the best plan was. Then Peter got dressed, here in this story, and jumped fully-clothed into the sea of Tiberias. It is fair to say that Peter is pretty full-on.

You see how these ripples of the pebble in the pond start spreading outwards? Already, we have referenced Maundy Thursday with the foot washing; and maybe Peter putting his clothes on is drawing attention to Adam and Eve in the garden, who made themselves some clothes to wear in order to cover their nakedness, of which they were suddenly ashamed – perhaps in the way that Peter, faced with his risen Lord, was suddenly ashamed of his denial of Jesus the night before the crucifixion. The charcoal fire, first in the courtyard where Peter denied knowing Jesus, and now here on the beach, also prompts our memories of that other event.

There are shades of feeding the five thousand and also of the Last Supper in the fish and bread.

And then there is the threefold question: Jesus told Peter that he would deny him three times, and he did; and now in this story, the Evangelist is reminding us of it when Jesus asks: Do you love me? three times.

Now, with all of these images playing in our heads, it is easy to reduce this conversation between Jesus and Peter to some sort of reconciliation: is this the point at which Jesus actually forgives Peter for denying him when he needed him most? I have to say, I’m not convinced. Certainly, nowhere in this story does Jesus say: I forgive you. I tend to think that Jesus thinks no forgiveness is necessary – or if so, that it is Peter who most needs to forgive Peter.

In fact, maybe forgiveness isn’t the issue at all here. God knows and loves **us** in our frailty, and God knew and loved Peter in **his** frailty too. So perhaps what this is really about is Peter accepting who Jesus needs him to **be**; who he is as a follower of Jesus.

In the synoptic gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke – Peter certainly denies knowing Jesus: do you know the man? I don’t know him. But John tells it differently: the question asked is: aren’t you one of his disciples? And Peter says: no, I am not. Subtle difference there.

So maybe this conversation acquires a different slant in the light of that. Jesus does not name, blame or shame Peter; he does not ask for his repentance; and he does not ask: do you love me in order to test him or trap him. That would not be the Jesus I know and love if he did any of those things. When Jesus asks: do you love me? he is calling out and confirming who and what Peter needs to be. And that person is the shepherd, now that Jesus will no longer be able to be that.

Denying who we are, as Peter did with that ‘no, I am not’, is a reality we can all identify with. We deny who we are for fear of not living up to someone else’s expectations; because we don’t want to disappoint; or because we might be judged or rejected for being who we really are. We are frightened we might not be liked – or loved either – for our real selves. So we play safe; we pretend; we wear masks depending on who we are with. Not everyone can be trusted with our personal truth.

And the silly thing is that we sometimes even try to cover up who we really are to God, the all-knowing. Which is the biggest waste of time and effort ever. 😊

So at that first charcoal fire, Peter had to make a decision: was he frightened of being crucified too? Or just not ready to admit his identity in Christ? And we can ‘get’ that, because it **is** hard to believe that Jesus believes in us. We can’t imagine that Jesus would hand us the task of being the good shepherd because he is no longer in the world. There is that bit in an earlier chapter, when Jesus says: I have other sheep that are not of this fold. Someone has to take responsibility for those other sheep …

And so, Jesus shows up on that shore, hosts a meal one more time, and tells Peter, and us at that second charcoal fire: I believe in you. I know who you are and I love you. *(Shades of ‘This is my Son, the beloved; with him I am well-pleased’ at Jesus baptism, and at every baptism since.)*

Whether you believe it or not, says Jesus, you are exactly the disciple I need, and there is a role that can only be fulfilled by you; by the set of skills and talents and the sort of faith that only you have. You are exactly what the world needs right now.

One last thing to think about: this story is set back in the disciples’ workaday lives. Rudderless and grieving, they have returned at least for the time being, to being fishermen. But this points, too, to the same reality that we have just noted about calling. Namely that what we see in this story is a portrayal of the presence of the risen Christ in real lives, and the difference that makes.

Going back to where Peter put his clothes on and jumped into the lake: one of the profound experiences which will have shaped the lives of these men would have been baptism – the whole business of being dunked in water as a symbol of cleansing, but also of dying to the old life and rising to new life in Christ; and getting dressed – being clothed in Christ; and then being preoccupied with this unsuccessful fishing trip but then turning, literally, to Christ on the shore.

All these are about what it means to be turned to Christ in our day to day lives – about the particular call that each of us hears to live our lives in particular ways. Because Jesus is there in our everyday lives. And we will find him in all sorts of unexpected places.

**Amen**