

## Sermon 5 May 2019

### John 21:1-19 and Acts 9:1-6

What are the words on the edge of the two pound coin? The phrase is 'Standing on the shoulders of giants'. And that is part of a quotation from a letter written by Sir Isaac Newton but he wasn't the originator of the phrase. The earliest recorded reference is by a 12th century theologian John of Salisbury in his writing on logic, in which he refers to philosopher Bernard of Chartres who said:

'We are like dwarves sitting on the shoulders of giants. We see more, and things that are more distant, than they did, not because our sight is superior or because we are taller than they, but because they raise us up, and by their great stature add to ours'.

Bernard de Chartres, who died about 1130, was head of the Cathedral school of Chartres. A visual reference to the shoulders of giants can be seen in the south rose window of the cathedral which shows the four major prophets - Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel and Daniel as giant figures, and on their shoulders sit the much smaller figures of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The evangelists are smaller yet they can see further, but only because the prophets have lifted them up. It is not the only window of the period to show a similar scene, another is the rose window of Notre Dame in Paris, which survived the recent fire.

The two men in our readings this morning – Simon Peter and Saul of Tarsus, who we know better as the apostle Paul, are, to my mind giants of our Christian faith and perhaps, because of the example of their lives and their writings, we too are lifted up on their shoulders.

But before either of them became giants, Jesus had cause to challenge them and forgive them. The forgiveness of Peter dominates our gospel reading and the challenge to Saul comes in the reading from Acts.

The way in which the gospel reading is structured can be read as a straightforward account or can be seen as referring back to the whole of Jesus' relationship with Peter.

The setting of the account is after the resurrection. Matthew and Mark's gospels record Jesus instructing the disciples to return to Galilee, to wait and he would come to them. They had done so. But I wonder what you do when you are waiting? Do you twiddle your thumbs, or like Peter do you jump up and get on with something useful to occupy the time? Peter went fishing. They had to eat after all. Peter may also have been fretting, knowing he had denied knowing Jesus and not yet having had the chance to face up to Jesus about it.

You might find it helpful to follow this in the reading on the sheet.

The disciples are back in Galilee where it all started for them (The Sea of Tiberius is another name for Galilee). And for Peter and the sons of Zebedee, James and John, they had been fishing when they first encountered Jesus. And they are fishing again, but after a night's fishing they had caught nothing. At day break, a stranger on the beach tells them to cast the net on the right side of the boat and they will find fish – they did and found such an abundance of fish. That echoes with the account in Luke's gospel at the start of Jesus' ministry when after a fruitless night's fishing Jesus commanded them to let down their nets into the deep water, when they obeyed their nets were filled. Maybe the memory of that is what clears their vision and reveals the stranger as being Jesus.

In an echo of the time when Peter walked on the water towards Jesus, he leaps out of the boat.

Jesus has lit a charcoal fire. There was charcoal fire burning in the courtyard of house of the High Priest where Peter had warmed himself before he three times denied knowing Jesus, just as Jesus had predicted.

There was fish on the fire and bread with it. A reminder of the feeding of the four and five thousand.

And Jesus took the bread and gave it to them, a reminder of the last supper.

And then to the moment of forgiveness. Jesus goes to the heart of the matter, if you like he goes straight for where Peter's pain is. Peter needs to be healed, to be released from the memory of denial and Jesus does that. He asks Peter three times if he loves him. And at each answer he instructs him to feed his sheep. The three times wipe out the three times of denial. But it's not as if Jesus is saying, there now, everything is ok because you say you love me.

Jesus doesn't just give reassurance and comfort, he gives Peter a commission to continue Jesus' work, and with the Holy Spirit Peter is equipped for witness and strengthened for confrontation.

This passage launches Peter from a time of waiting into the next part of the story. And we know that whilst he becomes an impressive leader of this band of Jewish Jesus followers, he doesn't always get things right, but he does take responsibility for those who come into the Kingdom of Christ.

And then the final reminder, Jesus tells Peter to follow him. The words he had used when they had first met – follow me.

Did you notice that Jesus already had fish cooking before the disciples caught any fish? However, he asked them to bring their catch ashore. Jesus is ahead of Peter – whilst he is able to provide the meal, he wants Peter, he needs Peter, to play his part in Jesus' future ministry.

Saul of Tarsus is a zealous man, who wants to defend the God of Israel. He is going about it in the best way he knows, by attempting to snuff out this spark, this new story that Jesus is a risen Messiah. Tom Wright suggests that as Saul is on the road to Damascus he is meditating on the passage in Ezekiel, the vision of heaven where the prophet describes the throne of God and that when Saul looks at the throne of God in his mind's eye, he sees the face of the person on the throne, and it is the face of Jesus and he hears the voice of Jesus challenging him. And that is what turns his world upside down. That is what he spends the next three days agonising over before Ananias a follower of Jesus, goes to his lodgings and baptises him. The beginnings of Paul's ministry is a 'follow me' moment for Saul. Tom Wright's suggestions are beautifully written in his biography of Paul.

What does 'follow me' mean for us? What are the things we have that will play a part in Jesus' ministry where we are?

Barbara Brown Taylor tells of her experience when praying about what she should do, what was her vocation? She believes that God's answer was: 'do anything that pleases you' and she came to realise that it wasn't the 'what' she did that mattered so much as the 'how' she did what she did; loving her God and her neighbour. And that, as Jesus provided fish for breakfast, he goes ahead of us, and we add our gifts to his resources.

John Stott adds to that by commending us to be dependent upon one another. Not to be so independent that we cut ourselves off from the 'mutual burdensomeness' that the family of God is called to be to one another.

And we can pray with hope, with open hearts, not hiding who we are from Jesus.

If we think we are worthless, that we have let Jesus or others down we can experience the forgiveness that Jesus gave to Peter and to Paul. That experience doesn't undo what we have done, it's not about forgetting, but it is about no longer being chained to the past.

If we think we are waiting to find out what next, then we needn't twiddle our thumbs but simply get on with what we choose to do, while loving God and our neighbour.

And as we do so we can be lifted up to stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us and we can enjoy the view.

**Sarah Thomas 5 May 2019**