

EASTER 3

Of all the Gospels, the fourth is arguably the most imaginative, dramatic, and far-reaching. Today's well-known beachside story is no exception. There's a danger that with so many different threads and themes going on, you could be in for several different sermons in one go – perish the thought! I want to home in on the charcoal fire which sets the scene, or does it? I can't help wondering if Shakespeare stole the idea for the beginning of 'Macbeth' ...but we will never know!

In Professor David Ford's latest and outstanding theological commentary on the Gospel of John, he reminds us of an earlier reference – Chapter 18, verse 8 – when the fire recalls the one in the courtyard of the high priest at which Peter was warming himself when he denied Jesus three times. But before we get to that painful reminder of Holy Week, Jesus is enjoying this third resurrection appearance I think, in which he acts as Host, Cook, Lord and Server.

There is this unforgettable scene, let's call it the BBQ scene, when Jesus is quite different from the many TV chefs of today who seem to be lost without a prompt. He just gets on without any fuss – and that beautiful charcoal smell of fish and pitta bread is all that it takes to recapture the Upper Room. It is all that it takes to remember the institution of that new, fresh, Eucharistic 'experience' of giving thanks for their shared, common meal: this 'ordinary' meal in which the risen Christ is truly present and magnificently real. Peter would have remembered that 'occasion for Alleluia' in a way that he

couldn't, when previously, he denied Jesus at his later Passion and trial.

Peter is a hugely important part of this particular script and we feel we know his temperament and character in a much more personal way than the other 'dramatis personae'. On the beach, he wouldn't have given the fire a second thought; instead he was working through whether this person telling him how to fish was someone he thought he knew from somewhere; and then, ironically, he was the first to recognize His Risen Lord, and Ours. He was beside himself with happiness, perhaps even a sense of one-upmanship...so the actual breakfast itself, when it was served by Jesus, was just another extra-ordinary moment when simple 'fisherman's fare' turned into a real banquet. It would have been so emotionally charged too and, for everyone present: the wonderful recognition, the different personal memories, the feeding (how many fish were there?).

On rare occasions like this, it must have been difficult to take in (let alone contain) what was happening, what they were thinking and feeling. And if that wasn't enough drama, John doesn't let up. He wants a separate scene after breakfast, for a climax between Jesus and Peter. Three times Jesus asks him 'Do you love me?' And when Peter answers so openly and honestly each time, we start to 'wince' a little as readers or watchers of this excruciating scene.

But the Gospel writer doesn't just have Peter in his sights and insight. He has us too. Are we excited about meeting our

Lord, and regularly, in Sacramental food? Are we thrilled to know his Risen presence with us today as he invites us again to his table? Do we love Him as we should? Or, do we sometimes do what children sometimes do with their parents – duck and dive a little, or even deceive a little – if the occasion merits it?

Like the very best of playwrights, and I am suggesting that the writer of John was one, we are left to go away and ponder some more. We may think we know the Christian story or even this single Gospel back to front. Even if that were true, we are left with this shared task and mission to tend and feed the sheep. We are left to be generous in our pastoral care and outreach, and to let the resurrection flame burn in others, however faintly.

With you, I do have to save some space for further thinking or application – how do we do this? - Just as we all have to save some space to encounter a different resurrection story each Sunday of Eastertide.

But let's never forget that without the good news of Easter, the Church could never have seriously started out in faith, hope and love. The great St Paul would definitely ratify that wholeheartedly. So let's never forget either, sisters and brothers: that the first Easter meal - whether that was at Emmaus or by the lakeside - was a joyous and shared one. When Christian Aid starts next week we are asked to search our hearts and pockets to make sure that everyone on earth is fed. No-one is left out or, ostracised. Christ is, let's

remember: our Host, Cook, Lord, and Server, for the rest of time.

Thanks be to our Triune God, Alleluia!