

## **SERMON FOR 3<sup>rd</sup> SUNDAY OF EASTER**

### **ALL SAINTS CHURCH, BIRKENHEAD**

As someone who particularly loves seafood, today's gospel puts a smile on my face. It is such a strange moment, the risen Christ appearing to his fearful disciples asking for what could be his favourite dish, a piece of broiled fish. Putting the strangeness of his request aside, Jesus seems - excuse the pun - to be a fish out of water, yet there is something so utterly human about this encounter.

We have recounted so much during this Easter time the horror of the crucifixion, the fear and confusion the disciples would of felt, and the subsequent joy of meeting the risen Christ. Things that are often so familiar can wash off on us, and become normalised, there is a danger we do that as we read today's Gospel account.

Our reactions to the resurrected Jesus are often just as confused as those of the first disciples. Who and what is this man, who has now supposedly risen from the dead, can appear through walls, still bears his scars, and yet desires the most primitive of human needs, to eat a meal with his friends. In turn those friends would have surely felt the human

temptation to want to take hold of that Christ, perhaps use him as they wanted, to find comfort and solace, to perhaps keep him to themselves, but he remained elusive.

But who can blame them for such thinking? They are the ones who are chosen by Jesus, his special group of disciples. They are the ones who put up with the three hard years on the road, the threat of death when Jesus was captured, and the recent fear that he was dead and gone.

Such fear of others and the identity crisis that follows is something that many groups throughout Church history have had to come to terms with. And it is not only a problem confined to the church, but to all human beings who's need to belong and be special so often becomes exclusive and critical of 'others'. It is impossible to know the minds of those first disciples, but it is easier to see that same human desire within ourselves. In his book "A generous orthodoxy" Brian D. McLaren who is a Christian writer and leader, reflects on his own experience, as a Christian in the United States, and how the relationship between the two has become so confused.

He writes “for me in the U.S now the supposedly undisputed Superpower in the world – I feel surrounded by Christians who very much like the idea of an American God and a middle-class Republican Jesus, first and foremost concerned about our National Security and Our Way of Life. “The Lord is my Shepherd” becomes “The Lord is our President” elected by us for our national interest. The language seems to serve the “powers to be” to bolster the status quo, to legitimise and protect and baptize whatever regime is in power, this feels like a tired old story that history has seen rise and fall many times.” While this book is over 10 years old and the American culture and context is different from our own, we see this sort of idea certainly coming to the fore in recent years as we have watched the political landscape become more divisive and radical. We also see the same ideas among many religious groups here in New Zealand and throughout the world.

Jesus, however challenges such ideas. and the accounts of his resurrection speak of the fact that Jesus cannot be put in a box. This is seen quite strangely in his culinary desires, to the strangeness of that request for a piece of fish. I do not think the gospel writer is trying to enlighten us to the fact that

Jesus was perhaps against people eating red meat and therefore we should all be vegetarians who perhaps enjoy the odd piece of fish. Rather the wisdom is found in the overall account/s of the risen Jesus with his disciples and the paradox that arises. This Jesus eats, he can walk through objects, he can be touched, he looks the same, but is not recognised. It is as if the writer is making the claim that this Jesus is everywhere and everything, he will not be confined to human definitions and ideas, but transcends them all. Another American writer Richard Rohr speaking of this paradox states: “The Risen Christ is our icon of God’s universal presence, now unlimited by space or time. This is why the resurrection stories always show Jesus’ body to be both here and there, passing through doors, visible and not invisible, white light itself, everywhere and nowhere, as it were. He is in all objects; even to Magdalene he says, “Do not cling to me” Why? Because you can’t, Christ is consciousness itself pervading all things- waiting and hoping for their inner “Yes”!

Rohr points to the idea that Jesus is both profoundly human, seen in the act of eating the fish and profoundly ‘other’ in his appearing from nowhere. In addition, he states explicitly that he is not

confined to one special group. This is seen in Jesus' famous words "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to *all nations*, beginning from Jerusalem." He is to be the Christ not just of those humble disciples, but the entire world.

This resurrection account is a powerful bridge between the events of Easter weekend and the Pentecost event that we will celebrate later on the 5<sup>th</sup> June. For this reason, it can often be forgotten that the appearance of Jesus to his disciples gives us a profound picture of God's heart for all peoples, all groups and all individuals. He is not confined to our particular theological definitions, or our own social and political agendas. He is the one who is with us in our humanity, and yet fills the whole earth. Our response to this universal nature is to be people who live with paradox, and always identify that the gospel is not just for our own Jerusalem's, but all nations. We participate in this vision of the world by loving those who are different to ourselves, by being open minded to the challenges of theological thinking and to be people who are not comfortable with the status quo. Therefore, as we come to this

table today, we too eat in the presence of Jesus, for we know he is with us, now and forever. Amen.