

John 21

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[0 : 00] I wonder how many of you enjoy a cooked breakfast. I'll tell you a wee story about a cooked breakfast.

A few years ago, I was invited to preach at a communion weekend, and the minister, who shall remain nameless, though if you're really interested for a small fee, I'm sure I could give you some clues as to who he was, but in this forum, he shall remain nameless. He phoned me a night before I was due to travel to where I was going to be preaching for that weekend, and he was giving me some indications as to what would be involved in the weekend. I can't remember all the details, but in the course of explaining to me some of those details, there was one thing in particular that he was very insistent on, and he said this. He said, now, on Saturday evening, my wife will ask you if you want a cooked breakfast, obviously on the Sunday morning, and he said the answer is yes. So, seemingly, if I had said no, he wouldn't get one either. So, regardless of whether I wanted one or not, he informed me as to how I was to answer that particular question, and sure enough, on the Saturday evening after the service, as we were having supper, the question came up, and I did what I was told, and we both enjoyed a cooked breakfast the following morning. It was unnecessary, really, for him to have given me that indication because I would have said yes anyway, but he just wanted to be sure that he didn't have some strange visiting preacher who didn't enjoy such a feast. Well, on this resurrection Sunday evening, we want to meet the risen Jesus on the occasion that He prepared a cooked breakfast for His disciples. We've read the passage there in John chapter 21. As they were out fishing, they see Jesus there on the shore, and when they arrive at the shore, what do they find? They find this fire that had been prepared, and on that fire, a fish was being cooked for them together with some bread. We want to think about this incident. It's a very warm incident, a very appealing incident. We're kind of drawn to it. It's something that you kind of feel, well,

I would have liked to have been there. It has that sense to it. But what we want to do is think about it a little this evening, and consider what instruction there is for us in this account.

The account begins in the following way. Afterwards, Jesus appeared again to His disciples. Now, I want to just comment a little on how the account begins, because it relates to what we should expect to learn from it. And the manner in which the version that we're using presents that opening to the account isn't too helpful. It speaks of Jesus appearing to His disciples, and the language of appearing doesn't seem very significant, simply a way of saying, well, should enough, He appeared, and then this happened. But the actual language that is used by John in opening this account and going on to say what he has to say is the language of Jesus revealing Himself again to His disciples. That would be a more literal translation of what John says. Jesus revealed Himself to His disciples. Now, why is that significant? Well, it's significant because in the Bible generally, but very particularly in John's gospel, this theme of revelation and of Jesus revealing

[3 : 39] Himself is a constant theme and a very significant theme. We won't go through and identify the different occasions, but perhaps if we just mention one at the very beginning of Jesus' public ministry.

You remember the first miracle that He performed when He changed the water into wine at Cana in Galilee, and at the conclusion of that account, we're told that this first miracle Jesus performed, and so He revealed His glory, and His disciples put their faith in Him. And this is the language that is being used here. Evidently, that miracle had that primary purpose. Over and above the provision of wine for those who needed it, that was a purpose, a legitimate purpose of the miracle, but the more fundamental purpose was that by this means Jesus made known to His disciples something of who He was.

And as I say, this is the language that we have here at the beginning of chapter 21. Jesus revealed Himself again to His disciples. This isn't just about Jesus providing a cooked breakfast for them, though that in itself is a perfectly reasonable thing for Him to do, and we can learn from that, but it's about Him making Himself known to them, and by extension to us. As we consider the passage then, we're able to discover who this risen Jesus is, what He's like, what do we learn about Him. The disciples learned about Him and from Him on this occasion, and so must we. But equally, as with the miracle that we commented on where Jesus revealed Himself, there was this impact, if you wish, there was this result that His disciples put their faith in Him. So, with us this evening, we want to discover what Jesus is like, the risen Jesus, the resurrected Lord, what's He like, what can we learn about Him, but also how are we to respond to Him? How can we cultivate and enrich our faith in Him as we meet Him on this occasion?

So, let's consider the passage in that way, with that intention. It's a beautiful account of Jesus on the shore of Galilee, and what we want to do is to see what we discover about Him in the account. What is it that Jesus reveals about Himself? And I want to notice or suggest five truths concerning the risen Jesus that this account or self-revelation of Jesus provides us with. And for each of these truths concerning Jesus, suggest what our response might be. And some of the occasions we'll be able to learn from the disciples how they responded, and on others we simply will identify the truth and think about how we might respond to these truths concerning Jesus, concerning the risen Jesus.

The first thing I want to notice about Jesus that is revealed to us in this incident is His friendship towards His disciples. Notice there in verse 5, as He addresses them for the first time on this occasion, He calls out to them, "Friends, haven't you any fish?" In actual fact, the whole account portrays Jesus as one who relates to the disciples as a friend. But we do have, very specifically, the manner that He addresses the disciples there in verse 5, as friends. "Friends, haven't you any fish?" In actual fact, the word that He uses there isn't a word that literally means friends, though it can have that meaning. It could be used in that way. The translation is a perfectly valid one. But the actual word He uses is a word that means children. In fact, we could recognize that a Greek word from how it is the root for English words connected to children. The Greek word is *paideia*. It's where you get pediatrics from. It's the same root word or Greek word from which, as I say, we can identify some English words that are connected. So, the word He uses is children.

[7 : 59] In fact, some of the translations you'll find opt for that more literal rendition. "Children, haven't you any fish?" But it would appear that it was a word that was used more widely and more generally in first century Palestine as a word that could mean friends. And so, that is how our version of the Bible chooses to translate it. And certainly, the word itself, but also the whole account is one in which we meet Jesus as one who is a friend of His disciples. Now, this idea of Jesus as a friend of His disciples is one that we've already encountered in the gospel accounts. Jesus Himself identifies Himself as a friend of His disciples. In this same gospel, in chapter 15, Jesus speaks of how He considers His own death as a death that He is dying for His friends.

Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down His life for His friends. So, here we find Jesus, this risen Jesus, the risen Lord, as a friend of His disciples. But this friendship, though a genuine friendship and one we can rightly describe as friendship, is not exactly as the friendships that we might enjoy. It's not a friendship between equals.

The disciples. The disciples are not, if we might put it in this way, they're not His mates. They're not His pals. And Jesus is certainly not viewed by them as their pal or their mate. Interesting in this account itself. Now, you might say that the circumstances of what was happening influence how they relate to Jesus, and perhaps on another occasion they would have related differently. But nonetheless, it is interesting that though Jesus addresses them as His friends, notice how they relate to Him. If we jump to verse 12, we'll be jumping from the beginning to the middle to the end in no particular order this evening. But notice in verse 12, Jesus said to them, come and have breakfast.

And then we read, none of the disciples dared ask Him, who are you? They knew it was the Lord. So, yes, they're friends, but there is this distance, we might say. There is this hesitancy on the part of the disciples as they recognize that this Jesus who is their friend is nonetheless one who has a presence and a weight to Him that leads them to be reluctant to even ask this question. It's a curious way of describing their thoughts. They know it's Jesus, and yet there's still this uncertainty, and yet they don't dare ask Him, who are you? So, yes, Jesus is their friend. Yes, He considers

them His friends.

But this is a very particular friendship, a genuine one, a real one, a precious one, but a very particular one in its characteristics. Indeed, that is emphasized in what Jesus said on that previous occasion.

[11 : 12] We've already quoted what He said in John chapter 15, greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. But then what does He immediately go on to say? He says, you are my friends if you do what I command you. That's a very unusual thing for a friend to say. It would appear almost condition his friendship on being obeyed. You might say, well, what kind of friendship is that? But this is a very particular kind of friendship. It's worth stressing that Jesus isn't saying that if you obey me, I'll be your friend. But He's certainly saying that we will give evidence of being His friends by obeying Him. So, this passage then presents Jesus as a friend of His disciples. And how do we respond to that? Well, certainly let's enjoy this reality that we are indeed His friends, that He considers us as His friends. And we can sing that chorus that we learned as children, and maybe as grown-ups we think is a childish one, and yet it's a wonderful one. What a friend we have in Jesus. And that is something that the Christian can sing and declare with joy. What a friend we have in Jesus. He considers us to be His friends. He addressed the disciples there on that resurrection day as His friends. So, also He considers us. But we also recognize that the evidence of our status as friends is doing what He commands us. So, first of all, then, the account presents to us Jesus as a friend of His disciples. But following on from that, we also see in what He does and the manner that He relates to His disciples, we also see His concern and care for them. In that same verse 5 where He addresses them as friends, friends, haven't you any fish?

They've been fishing. We know what happened. Peter suggested that they go fishing. They go fishing. There's much debate as to whether they should have gone fishing or shouldn't have gone fishing.

I think it's always best to err on the side of charity. And I see no reason why they shouldn't have gone fishing. Why not go fishing? They were in Galilee because Jesus had told them to go to Galilee in that they were obedient. He had said, go to Galilee and wait for me there. They'd done that.

Pentecost was still a future event. They were still waiting for that empowering that would allow them to then go on and do all that Jesus would have them do. But now they have time on their hands, we might say. And even disciples of Jesus still have to eat. So, they went fishing.

But they've had an unsuccessful outing. They haven't caught any fish. And Jesus is concerned about this. Friends, haven't you any fish? He doesn't ask because He is unaware of the answer. He knows that they've been unsuccessful. But He asks in order that it would give Him the opportunity to show His concern and do something about it. He cares for them. He cares for them in matters great, but He cares for them also in matters small. His is a friendship that is heavy-duty friendship in the sense that He's willing to die for His friends. But it's also a friendship that is shown in helping them catch some fish after a long and fruitless night. And so, we find and encounter and meet with a Jesus who cares for and is concerned for His disciples. How do we respond to that truth? What does that reveal to us? Well, that very simple but very comforting truth and reality that this same Jesus has this same care and concern for us, for you, in the seemingly trivial, in the seemingly mundane, in the hard grind of everyday living where things sometimes don't work out as we had planned, where we have our own fishing expeditions, if we can call them that, where we catch nothing, and we're discouraged, and we're depressed, and nothing seems to be working out as we would have wanted, or hoped for, or expected, or hoped for, or expected. And we think, well, I just got to make my way through this. Why would Jesus be interested in such trivial details of my life? But He is, just as He was for

[15 : 49] His disciples on this occasion. In everyday living, in the challenges of everyday living, Jesus is looking from the shore, as it were, concerned for you, ready and willing to help. So, we meet Jesus, who is a friend of His disciples, Jesus, who has this care and concern for them, but we also meet a Jesus who has a knowledge that they need, and who can direct His disciples in the way that they need to be directed. Immediately on, asking the question, if they had any fish, the answer, a monosyllabic but very eloquent one, no, they answered. No fish. And then what happens? He said, throw your net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some. Jesus knew where they needed to cast their net. Here again, people speculate as to how He knew. Was it something that

He was actually able to physically see, given the angle that He was at on the shore, and the way the light was playing on the sea, and all kinds of wonderful explanations are given as to how He might have been able to see what folk in the boat couldn't see. It may be.

It seems unlikely. We're told that the distance was a significant one, over a hundred yards. And so, any kind of natural explanation, though we have no problem in principle with there being a natural explanation, but it doesn't seem likely that there was one. Rather, this is knowledge that Jesus had that belongs to Jesus as the Maker of all the fish in every sea. And He knows what they must do, and He tells them what they must do that they would secure this catch of fish that they are so in need of, and so wishing to secure. Jesus had the knowledge that they didn't have. Jesus was able to grant them the direction that they needed that no other could grant. And of course, this is true not only of a fishing expedition. The disciples needed to appreciate that in everything they would do, they needed to bow to the greater knowledge and direction of their risen Lord. Now, while I think it would be wrong to, in an exaggerated way, seek to identify symbolism in every detail of the account, something that has often been done, and while we don't want to do that, we do know that in this matter of fishing, very particularly, it was a picture, a metaphor that Jesus Himself used in relation to His disciples.

When He first called His disciples, indeed, when He calls His disciples who were by this very lake, we remember the occasion. He employed a fishing metaphor, I will make you fishers of men. And so, as I say, well, we don't want to go overboard, if you forgive the pun, in terms of the symbolism of the passage, surely it's legitimate to see in the lessons to be gained from a fishing expedition, lessons that would apply to their mission as disciples of Jesus Christ, going into the world as fishers of men. Fishing was a symbol of their mission, and the lessons learned that morning would be and could be applied to the greater mission that they would embark on following Pentecost.

They stood in permanent and absolute need of the direction of Jesus, of the greater knowledge that Jesus had in everything they had to do. The response that we must make to this truth is perhaps a very obvious and self-evident one. We, too, stand in need of the Lord's greater knowledge and direction. We must ever be reminded of what Jesus taught His disciples in the upper room, just soon before His death. Apart from Me, you can do nothing. Apart from Me, you can do nothing. You can't even, in the case of the disciples on that occasion, experience fishermen, and you can't even catch a single fish. Apart from Me, you can do nothing. And if they couldn't catch a single fish on the Sea of Galilee, if even for that they stood in need of Jesus, how much more as they would embark on this great mission of reaching out to the whole world with the good news of the gospel as fishers of men.

[20 : 38] This need in which we stand of Jesus' greater knowledge and of Jesus' direction, it's true for us as individual Christians in the lives that we live, but it's also true for us as a church, as we would seek to carry out God's mission in the world. We have to listen to His voice directing us where we will cast our net, and we must obey Him as He would direct us what to do and how to do it and where to do it.

So, here we meet a Jesus whose knowledge and direction we stand in need of. But I want to notice one further thing, a penultimate thing that we can discover or that Jesus reveals of Himself in this incident, and I'm describing it as His generosity, His generosity. In verse 11, we're told concerning the nature of the catch. They hadn't caught anything. They're told to cast their nets on the right side of the boat, and hey, presto, they have this great catch. But we're actually told in great detail the extent of it. There in verse 11, Simon Peter climbed aboard and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, 153, but even with so many, the net was not torn. Now, in this matter of the size of the catch and the actual number that we're given, 153, the church fathers in the first centuries of the church and in subsequent centuries, many commentators have really gone to town and had great fun, really, trying to establish if there's any great significance in this number, 153. And there are literally dozens of different suggestions as to how significant this might be. I'll just give you one, really of anecdotal interest. I'm not giving it any credence whatsoever, but there was one fellow, Jerome. I think we've mentioned Jerome in the past. He was sure he'd read somewhere some expert on fish had told him or he'd discovered that there were 153 species of fish in the oceans of the world. Now, of course, we know that there are thousands, but he reckoned there were 153. And so, this 153 was symbolic of the whole world, just as every single fish was in that net. So, in the mission of the church, we would reach out to the whole world. Well, it's a lovely idea, but of course, it really is very fanciful. And there are many other interpretations of that kind. But what I would say

is, while there's not great merit in thinking about all these different interpretations, I do think there is some symbolism, very simple, but some symbolism in the number. Not in the precise number, but in this fact, that it was a very large number. That is deliberately emphasized. It's really at the heart of this account that it was such a large number. It was evidently a very surprising number in the circumstances that they would have caught so many large fish. Indeed, they're surprised that the net was not torn. It's almost as if you would have expected the net not to be able to hold all of these fish.

And so, in that simple fact that it was a very large number, I think there is significant symbolism, if you wish. It speaks of Jesus as one who is generous in His provision for His friends. And if we do take, as I think we can legitimately take, fishing as a symbol of their mission as disciples, then I think the lesson is clear. I think it would have been a lesson the disciples would have taken on board and understood. Jesus would be generous in blessing them as they fish for men, as He was generous with them in providing this monumental catch of large fish. And the net wasn't broken, not one was lost.

We could go down that road and try and apply some symbolism to it, but we won't do that. But just this simple truth, that it was a large catch of fish, a simple evidence of the Lord's generosity in blessing their mission. And so, as we would respond to that ourselves, we too can be sure that the risen Jesus, our Lord, is generous with us in so many ways, but very especially as He directs us in our mission to the world, to the nations, to the community where He has placed us. The fields are not only ripe unto harvest, they're large fields offering up a generous harvest. So, this account speaks to us, I think, of Jesus' generosity. But the final thing that I want to say, and very briefly with which to close, it presents us a Jesus, as it paints the portrait of a Jesus with a servant heart. We come back to where we began. This picture of Jesus cooking breakfast for His disciples there on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus, the eternal

[25 : 48] Son of God, soon to ascend to the right hand of the Father, and there He is preparing breakfast for His disciples. It's a beautiful picture, but it also demands a response. And perhaps in this matter, the response that we would do well to give is that in this, Jesus presents us with an example, an example for us to follow. If He, who is our Lord and Master, prepared breakfast for His disciples, and surely this is the life of service and discipleship that He asks of us, that we too would be servants, that we too would humbly seek the good of others, and in these simple and mundane tasks be prepared to serve our brethren and indeed others. We are to be like Him just as soon before His death. On the Thursday of Passion Week, He washed His disciples' feet, and He very explicitly said, this I have done as an example that you might follow. So here, though He doesn't explicitly make that demand upon them, I think it's evident that the challenge, the response that would be appropriate from the disciples and from us is that we too would seek to have that servant heart as we would serve

Him and serve others in our life as His disciples. So, the passage begins then, hinting that in what follows there will be truth concerning Jesus. Jesus revealed Himself again to His disciples, truth that we can identify, that we can celebrate, that we can enjoy, but also that would demand of us a response. And we thought a little of how we might respond to these truths this evening.

Well, that God would help us so to do. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we come to You, and we do thank You for Your Word. We thank You for the manner in which You are a God who is interested in the big matters, in the big issues, but also in matters that may seem small and ordinary and mundane. We pray that we would know what it is to enjoy the friendship of Jesus. We pray that we would know what it is to show ourselves to be His friends as we follow Him and obey Him. Lord, we pray that we would know something of His care and concern and appreciate it and enjoy it of His great generosity towards us.

Help us very especially to be conscious of the need in which we stand of His greater knowledge and of His direction in all that we do. Help us to know and to have something of that servant heart as we would live our lives as Christians in this world. And all of these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Let's close our time together, our service this evening, by singing again. And we'll sing Psalm 146. We'll sing the whole of the psalm in Sing Psalms, and we'll sing to the tune Stuttgart. Psalm 146 in Sing Psalms. You'll find that on page 191.

[29 : 20] Let's stand to sing the song.

Let's sing the song. Praise the song.

Praise Him, Lord, my soul. Praise Him, and I show Him all my days. While I live to God my Savior, from my heart I will sing praise.

In the church, our trusted princes, hearts of heaven have a say.

All their plans will come to nothing when they perish in the grave.

[30 : 25] Blessed is the one who truly looks for help to Jacob's God.

Blessed is the one who places all his hope upon the Lord.

He who takes the earth and heaven and blesses with all their storm.

He who gives his every promise. Who is faithful evermore.

He delivers from oppression and relieves the hungry's plight.

[31 : 31] He releases those in prison. To the one the Lord gives sight.

Those who are bound and erases. All delights in righteousness.

He protects and cares for strangers. He protects and cares for strangers. With those and the fatherless.

He frustrates the wicked's plan. He loves strength. He loves strength. He loves strength. He loves strength. He loves strength. He loves strength.

The wicked's plan. So the heart through endless days. Praise to every generation. Praise your God, O Zion.

[32 : 38] Praise you. Now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all now and always.

Amen. Thank you. Thank you, great, ■■■ete. Thank you God. Thank you. Thank you.