**John 21:1-19**

**Jesus is Restoring Us**

I don’t know if we really ought to have favourite passages of Scripture. But if we are allowed them, this is my favourite. It is such a beautiful story of grace and compassion and loving kindness. Every time I read it, I see something different.

And John crafts the story so well, it is beautifully told. And through it, we have so much to learn about who we are and who Jesus is to us.

When I was a teenager, one of my best friends bought a clapped out, rusty old MG Midget car and he loved it so much and he spent every spare evening and hours over each weekend, restoring this car to its former beauty. Bit by bit, hour by hour, minute by minute, he poured his life into this car: searching out original parts, mending, polishing, buffing up - until one day, he was able to spark up the engine and listen to the purring of his finely restored vehicle.

And that is not a bad analogy for what we see happening in this story. Bit by bit, Jesus is restoring his disciples; showering them with love and care and attention, restoring them to their former beauty, and loving them through the process.

So here we have a story of Jesus restoring his disciples and, by implication, how he seeks to restore each one of us too.

This was the third time that Jesus had revealed himself to his disciples. The first time was to Mary Magdalene when she thought he was the gardener. The second time was behind closed doors when he had invited Doubting Thomas to touch his wounds. And here Jesus reveals himself again to the disciples, this time by the Sea of Tiberius, which is another name for Lake Galilee.

And it’s quite significant that the disciples were fishing on Lake Galilee because it shows us that, since the crucifixion and even since the appearance of Christ to them the last time, the disciples had given up hope completely and gone home, gone back to their previous lives and jobs. Lake Galilee was 80 miles from Jerusalem where Jesus had last appeared to them. The disciples had travelled 80 miles home in between appearances. That was no short distance in those days, so they really had given up and gone home - they were not hanging around Jerusalem wondering what was coming next…

And the disciples, in their desolation, had dispersed too. They aren’t all together here – there are only 7 of them. Perhaps the others had given up completely. The group had disbanded.

And so, when Jesus appears to his disciples, he is appearing to broken and vulnerable men who had no sense of hope for the future. Disciples, like us, desperately in need of a fresh start with God, desperately in need of finding value and worth and a sense of identity, to know that they are loved and that their loves are worth something.

And the appearance happens at the crack of dawn. Jesus stands on the beach but the disciples don’t recognise him. They are about 100 yards away.

And then the interaction between them begins; one of the most beautiful interactions in Scripture, a really beautiful conversation that shows the absolute grace of God. And, as is often the case with John’s accounts in his Gospel, every word really matters and so I want to go through the conversation in some detail to really get to the heart of what is happening here.

Jesus begins the conversation in verse 5: “Children, you have no fish, do you?” The word Jesus uses to address them is ‘paidia’ – children. What a beautifully intimate way to address his disciples. He doesn’t call them ‘Men’ or ‘Friends’ or ‘Brothers’. He calls them ‘children’. He knows how weak and vulnerable they are feeling. He knows how much they are hurting. He knows how much they need to be met with love. And so he calls them his children - an indication of the depth of love and sense of protection he has over them.

Jesus is restoring them.

And then Jesus tells them to put their nets down on the other side of the boat and they will catch fish there. And sure enough, when they follow Jesus’ instructions, their nets fill up. And in this very act, again, Jesus is showing them how much he loves them and wants to forgive everything they have done wrong since the crucifixion. Because this story may remind you of an earlier encounter, recorded in Luke 5, where Jesus is standing on the shore and says to Simon Peter and his colleagues, “Push the boat out further to the deep water, and you and your partners let down your nets for a catch.” And they do – and they catch so many fish their nets are about to break. And what is that encounter in Luke 5? It is the calling of the disciples to follow Jesus.

So here is Jesus meeting the disciples, after all their failure during Passion Week, after they have run away, after they have given up hope and gone back to their old lives. Here is Jesus meeting with them in the same way he met with them on Day One, doing the same thing that introduced them to him at the beginning. And it’s as if he is saying, “Do you remember how it was before all this mess happened? It can be like that again. Let’s start afresh. Let’s go back to the beginning. Let’s start again together. I forgive you and am still calling you.”

Such a beautiful act of grace and mercy.

Jesus is restoring them.

And it is at this point that John recognises Jesus and shouts, “It is the Lord!” Simon Peter, ever the impetuous disciple, tucks his fisherman’s smock into his belt and swims to shore to see Jesus, leaving the other disciples with the hard work of getting the boat back safely to land.

When they get back to land, we are told in verse 9 that Jesus and Peter are sitting together round a charcoal fire. Again, another beautiful detail that shows the depth of Jesus’ restorative love. The last time that Jesus and Peter had been together near a charcoal fire was in the courtyard of the High Priest Caiaphas on Maunday Thursday – the night that Jesus was being tried. In Luke 22, we are told that Peter sat by a fire in the courtyard while Jesus is being interrogated and he denies knowing Jesus and the cock crowed and in verse 61, the damning words: “The Lord turned round and looked straight at Peter”. But here they are again, sitting together by a fire and Jesus, again, is looking straight at Peter. But this time, there is no element of judgement in his eyes. He sits and looks at Peter with nothing but compassion and loving kindness.

Jesus is restoring him.

And then Jesus says to them, ‘Bring some of the fish you have just caught’. Another beautiful act of compassion and loving-kindness. Because Jesus has already got fish on the fire, cooking away. Perhaps the disciples think that they have nothing Jesus needs; they have nothing to offer Jesus whatsoever, he doesn’t need them. But Jesus says, ‘No, I want to eat your fish. I value what you have caught. I value what you have to bring to me.’ Does this remind us of another story in the Gospels? Isn’t it like the feeding of the 5000 in John 6? There, the little boy comes to Jesus with five loaves and two fishes. And Jesus looks with compassion on the boy and says, ‘Thank you for your gift. That is all I need.’ And in the same way here, by accepting the disciples’ fish, Jesus is saying that they do have value and worth. Whatever little quantity they can offer, it is enough for him.

Jesus is restoring them.

So they sit down to eat together and in verse 13 we read, ‘Jesus gave them the bread’. How reminiscent that would have been for the disciples of the last time that Jesus gave them bread at the Last Supper, where the denials and the betrayals and the cowardice had all begun. But here is Jesus sitting with them again, sharing bread with them, still offering hospitality, still serving them, still loving them.

Jesus is restoring them.

And then Jesus looks at Simon Peter and he says, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me more than these others do?’ He uses Simon’s full name and title – Simon, son of John. Now that’s interesting because, in my experience, full names are used in one of two ways. The first is when we are in trouble. Even now, when our daughter Rebekah has done something wrong, force of habit, I still shout at her, ‘Rebekah Madison Griffiths, come here!’ The full name is used when we are in trouble. Maybe Simon Peter thinks he is in trouble here when Jesus looks at him and says, ‘Simon, son of John…’ But a full name is also used when we are about to make a covenant commitment or vow, when an important relational contract is about to be formed. So when we got married, our vows were made using our full name. Perhaps in this story, by using his full name, ‘Simon son of John’, Peter is not in trouble but is about to be commissioned for something important.

Peter has nothing to fear.

Jesus is restoring him.

Now, let’s look at the detail of the questions Jesus asks him. To get under the skin of what’s happening here, we need to know that, in Greek, there are a few different words for ‘love’. In English, we only have the one word but in Greek, there are different words for different kinds of love. And, in this passage, there are two different words used. One is ‘agape’, which indicates the love of deep fellowship, complete union. the deepest and most profound type of love there is. The second word is ‘philo’, which indicates brotherly love, deep friendship.

So, in verse 15, Jesus asks Simon Peter, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me?’ And the word Jesus uses is ‘agape’: ‘Do you love me with a total and utter commitment? Are we in absolute union together?’ And Simon replies, ‘Yes, Lord, you know I love you.’ And the word Simon has replied with is ‘philo’. ‘Jesus, I love you. But to be honest, the way I betrayed you and ran away shows that I only love you like a brother – not as I should.’ Jesus looks at Simon and he says, ‘That’s OK. Feed my sheep’.

Jesus is restoring him.

Then in verse 16, Jesus does the same thing again. ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me?’ - ‘agape’ again…‘Simon, aren’t you the one who through the years has promised never to leave me? Aren’t you the one who has always promised to live and die for me? Are you saying that you don’t have ‘agape’ love for me?’ And Simon Peter is again confronted by his own weakness and frailty and he says to Jesus, ‘You know I love you’ - ‘philo’ love – brotherly love. ‘I’m sorry, Lord. I have tried and I have failed. I do love you, I really do. But I can’t live up to my own words. I know I bragged about my loyalty. I know I thought I was the bees-knees as a disciple. But at the end of the day, I can’t live up to my own standards.’ Jesus says, ‘That’s OK. Do the best you can. Feed my sheep’

Jesus is restoring him.

And then, a third time, Jesus asks him, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me?’ But this time, Jesus uses the word ‘philo’. ‘Simon, you say you have brotherly love for me. But what kind of a brother betrays his kinsman? What kind of a brother denies even knowing him? What kind of a brother runs away to save his own skin? Do you even have brotherly love for me?’ And we read in verse 17 that Peter was sad because he knew in his heart of hearts that he could not claim to have even brotherly love, such was the depth of his sin and betrayal. So Peter replies, ‘Lord, you know all things, you know I love you!’ And it is ‘philo’ love, which Peter uses here.

And each one of us, when we attend to the truth in our own hearts, stands with Peter at this moment. We look at Jesus and we sense him looking at us and we say, ‘Lord, I want to love. I really, really want to do what is right. I want to serve you. My intentions are good, honestly…but I am weak and frail and I get it wrong so often. I let you down, I betray you, I run away. My best is just not good enough. But please know, Lord, in my heart of hearts, despite my behaviour, I really do love you to the best of my ability. The love I have for you is not what you deserve But it’s the best I can offer.’

And Jesus looks you in the eye and he looks me in the eye and today he says to us: ‘That’s OK. The best you have to offer is good enough for me. I love you. I forgive you. I want to be with you.’

Today, Jesus is restoring us.

And, as Jesus restores us, he asks only one thing of us: ‘Take care of my sheep’.

Love one another.

Take care of one another.

Forgive one another.

Have compassion on one another.

Show kindness and tolerance and patience towards one another.

Share hospitality with one another.

That is all Jesus asks of us.

After all our sin and betrayal. After all our denying him in our thoughts and words and actions. After all the cowardice we have shown through our lives in faith. After all our apathy in discipleship. After all that, Jesus meets with us today and says, ‘It’s OK. I still love you. If you want to make it better – just love one another as I have loved you.’

Jesus is restoring us.

And so we come to the very end of this incredible encounter; an encounter through which Simon Peter is restored, an encounter through which the disciples are restored, an encounter through which we have the assurance that Christ restores us. And the closing words in verse 19 are this: ‘Then Jesus said to him, ‘Follow me.”’ The ultimate act of reconciliation and restoration…

Jesus finally brings Simon Peter right back to the beginning, right back to his original calling more than three years previously. All those years previously, Jesus had stood on the shore of Lake Galilee, looking at a fisherman called Simon wearing a fisherman’s smock tucked into his belt, with the salt of the sea on his face and in his tousled hair, with the smell of fresh fish hanging in the air. And on that day, Jesus had commissioned this fisherman with the words, ‘Follow me’. And now, after all that has happened - the drama of the three years following, the ups and downs, the lows, the highs, the crowds, the healings, the raising of people from the dead, the adventures of faith and mission, the torture, the betrayal, the death, the burial, the resurrection - after all this, Jesus is back on the same shore of the same Lake Galilee. He is looking at the same fisherman called Simon, who is wearing a fisherman’s smock tucked into his belt with the salt of the sea on his face and in his tousled hair, with the smell of fish still hanging in the air. And on this day, Jesus re-commissions the same fisherman with the same words, ‘Follow me’.

Jesus has restored him.

All has been put right in this moment of reconciliation and restoration.

And so it is with us today. Jesus has restored us. Our past sins and failings have been forgiven and forgotten. This is a new moment, a new beginning.

Jesus has restored us.

Such is the grace and mercy and compassion and loving kindness of God.

So Jesus says – again – to each one of us, ‘Follow me’.

How the story ends is up to you...