



## 1 Galilee of the disciples

Galilee is where Jesus says that he will meet with his disciples (Matthew 27:10b; Mark 16:7; Luke 24:6). I find that when we think of Galilee, there are a number of projections we may wish to impose upon the place. These projections might come out of our experience or they might come from romantic perceptions we may have about the biblical Galilee; perceptions which are built upon only knowing part of the story, or having a vision of an area that is trapped in a time warp.

Upper Galilee was known as Galilee of the Gentiles (Isaiah 9:1). The original Jewish population had been taken into exile by the Assyrians and by Jesus' time different people groups had moved into the area. Although Jewish people had repopulated the area a century or two before Jesus' time, and there had been some forced conversions of people to Judaism, there were also likely to be a mixture of Phoenicians, Ammonites, Moabites, Edomites and Palestinians. By the first century AD, it was part of the Roman Empire and there were 15 fortified cities in Galilee; Sepphoris, although not mentioned in the gospels, was one such cosmopolitan city just three and a half miles away from Nazareth that was probably being built when Jesus lived in Nazareth. Given that the term 'carpenter' could apply to the whole construction industry, it is possible that Jesus, with Joseph, was involved in its construction. To the Jews of Jerusalem and Judea, Galilee was where you met with the other nations and religions. There were also Jewish people but these would include some who might be described as Jews, but whose faith was only skin deep, hiding the folk religion from a previous faith allegiance.

But for the disciples, meeting Jesus in Galilee, more than anything else, meant meeting Jesus in the 'here and now'. Galilee was the place where they had lived and belonged; where their families were. Galilee was not only home, but it also meant going back to the day job; the place where many of them fished for a living.

For us, too, it is in the 'here and now' of our homes and our jobs where we should expect Jesus to meet with us. This is where Jesus will expect us to live out our Christian lives. We will look forward to meeting Jesus on a Sunday morning when we worship with the congregation that we belong to. We might look forward to meeting with Jesus within a spiritual retreat at a retreat centre, or as we enjoy the wonder of God's creation on a day out or a holiday. There might be special places for us, perhaps a historic church that has been soaked in prayer for centuries where we can hope to meet with Jesus. There will be times when we are with family and friends who are special to us, and when we celebrate special occasions that we will look to meet with Jesus as well. All of these places are better considered as our Jerusalems.

Personally, I prefer to meet with Jesus when I have planned the meeting and am appropriately prepared. Sunday morning suits me fine. I can put on my Sunday best, choose the place where we can meet within a particular time slot and prepare myself mentally and spiritually for the encounter. But that is not how Jesus works. He chooses the everyday life of Galilee. As for being dressed in his Sunday best, Peter was naked (John 21:7) when he met and recognised Jesus. At one level this reminds us of Adam and Eve, taken by surprise by God in the garden of Eden, but Peter's nakedness reminds us of his and our vulnerability. Peter does put some clothes on for the meeting, but we must



expect Jesus to meet us aware of our vulnerability and of our weaknesses, rather than when we are fully prepared and in our Sunday best.

Jesus wants to meet the real 'me' and not the 'me' that I have carefully prepared, and pretended to be, in order to impress him. I might, or might not, be able to convince other people on a Sunday morning about who I am, but I am not able to convince Jesus. Jesus knows who I really am and the more open I am with myself, about who I really am, the sooner we can move to the authentic conversation when he meets with me.

When I first started interviewing people for the Church Mission Society, 40 years ago, most of those I interviewed had come from church families. Increasingly, over the years, this changed and many came from non-church families. These were those who Jesus had met with during their times of vulnerability; people who had faced a time of crisis: mourning; serious illness; breakdown of marriage or other relationship issues; addiction; abuse; unemployment; rejection; other crises. It gave me an amazing insight into God's grace and gave me an awareness that I should expect to be able to meet with Jesus when I was vulnerable and exposed, rather than when I thought that I was strong and concentrating upon my strengths rather than my weaknesses and vulnerabilities.

So recognising Jesus in our Galilee means we need to be able to recognise him in our everyday lives and in our workplace. It is essential that we look to experience Jesus in the place that is 'here' for us. We need to experience Jesus in our home, in our day-to-day relationships, in the places where we carry out our day-to-day activities, in the church that we regularly attend and among the people that we regularly worship with. It is important that we can learn to meet with Jesus in the mundane of our daily lives as well as in the special times. We need to meet and recognise Jesus in our disappointments, unfulfilled aspirations and the messiness of human relationships. We need to be able to find him in the events that cause us to lie awake and in the ambiguities and compromises that life presents us with. The good news is that it is in our 'here', our Galilee, where Jesus promises to meet with us.

**What experiences do you have of meeting Jesus in the everyday life of your Galilee, rather than in worship or specifically Christian activities?**

## 2 Galilee of the Gentiles

The thought of meeting Jesus in Galilee embraces the idea that we might meet with Jesus as we meet with those of other faiths and worldviews. How do we view those of other faiths? The answer will be determined partly by our previous experience of meeting those of other faiths. I had two different Jewish friends at different times at school. One was probably more atheistic than anyone else at school, and I didn't find out much about other faiths from either of them. I probably lived much of my life in a Christian bubble at university, and cannot think of anyone from another faith that I knew during that time. From those experiences, or lack of experiences, other faiths were belief systems, but weren't about real people, so weren't something I needed to take seriously.



Living in inner-city Rochdale, I met and made friends with a lot of Muslims. As I got to know them, they became people, rather than being defined by their ethnic grouping and faith; as with all people, some were good and some were bad and many were somewhere in between. Many very faithfully lived out their religious practices and some didn't. Some of those who lived out their religious practices very clearly had a strong religious faith that motivated their values and attitudes to life, and others didn't. They were first and foremost people, and diverse, then they were Muslims.

My generation was brought up with a sense of religious superiority, which didn't take other faiths seriously, so there was a need to break down that attitude within me. Meeting with people who I respected and finding out about their worldview and its impact upon their life meant that I had to take their worldview and faith seriously. What can easily happen after that is a reaction to the earlier sense of superiority; we can move to a position of deciding that all faiths are the same. In retrospect I realised that this is just as insulting to other faiths as it is to Christianity.

Being involved, as a Christian, with inner-city issues in Rochdale, we found ourselves working alongside Muslims and also Marxists; we obviously had a shared agenda to some extent in tackling various social and community concerns. For a few months we hosted a three-way dialogue that allowed us to get a better understanding of our worldviews, and what motivated us to be involved in the issues that we were involved in together. Subsequently I have often had deep conversations with Muslims and, to a lesser extent, with those of some other world faiths.

When you begin such conversations, you often begin to see that you have a shared vocabulary. But as you get deeper into discussions, you realise that the same words can have very different understandings. Muslims will talk about The Prophet, but will also talk of prophets and some of the prophets are the same ones as Christians would call prophets, but the understanding of the lives of those same prophets might be very different. In Islam prophets don't suffer, as such suffering wouldn't be tolerated by the God who sent them. In Judaism and Christianity a prophet seems more likely to suffer than to not suffer. Stephen in his final speech before martyrdom asks his persecutors 'Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute?' (Acts 7:52). This different way of understanding prophets leads me to a better understanding of the way that God suffers. It is this suffering, on behalf of God's creation, which reveals the sacrificial love, shown by Jesus, at the heart of Christianity.

When I lived in a Christian community house in Middlesbrough, we were asked by the local Community Relations Council if we could temporarily host the new Community Relations Officer, a Muslim, while he found a permanent home. We had our own Christian liturgy that we tried, although not very successfully, to use every evening. Sharing our house with a Muslim, who went up to his room regularly every evening to pray after we had eaten and washed up together, did wonders for our joint Christian prayer life! There wasn't any sense of there being a spiritual competition going on, but we were impressed by his self-discipline in prayer and realised that we should learn from that and get a bit more self-discipline into our prayer life, rather than so easily finding excuses to do something else. That regular prayer life should have been part of our Christian life, but we hadn't really recognised it as such before.



There is an interesting sub-plot to the story of the visit of the wise men to worship Jesus in Bethlehem. They start the story as stargazers, who believe that the future is foretold; it is already determined and can be read in the stars (Matthew 2:1-2). After meeting with the infant Jesus, they have a dream warning them not to return to Herod, but to return to their own country by another road (Matthew 2:12). At the beginning of the narrative, they believe that the future is foretold, at the end of the narrative, they realise that their own actions can and will determine the future. When Matthew says that they return to their home by another road, he isn't just speaking geographically; their worldview has changed from believing that the future is foretold to believing that they can impact upon the future. In our own age, when we discover that some people believe that the future is predetermined, we can gain a better understanding of the way in which God allows us to help shape the future through our own actions and being involved with God in his mission.

It is in discussing my own beliefs with the member of another faith that I can better see and recognise the Jesus who is not part of the other person's perspective or, sometimes, recognise the Jesus they have revealed to me who should have been in my own understanding, but who I had previously failed to see. While I feel that it would be nice to believe that all faiths lead equally to God, that would be to imply that the crucifixion was totally unnecessary; without crucifixion there would have been no resurrection. With all sensitivity and humility I can only declare that salvation for all, and the redemption of the whole creation, is only possible through Jesus' death and resurrection. I am aware that I haven't mentioned mission here; that will follow in the next chapter, but first we want to identify how we recognise Jesus ourselves within Galilee of the Gentiles.

Galilee of the Gentiles was also the hotbed of radical thinking and of revolutionary movements and rebel leaders. The religious authorities in Jerusalem were particularly wary of Jesus and his followers because they came from Galilee and that is where rebel movements often came from. As with discussions with those of other faiths, it is when we get into discussions with those of other worldviews that we might find that we can recognise Jesus in ways we hadn't noticed before. Throughout the centuries we have usually seen Christians at the forefront in challenging how society functions and in sharing love and resources with those who have been marginalised by society.

In Acts 2 and 4 we see radical sharing of possessions between the early Christians. The believers in the Diaspora collect money for famine relief, each according to their need, to be sent to Judea (Acts 11:27-30). From the first resurrection appearance and throughout Acts, we notice an increased understanding of the role of women in contrast to the prevailing cultural view, and in Acts and in Paul's epistles we see the barriers between Jewish and Gentile believers breaking down. The early, pre-Christendom Christians were pacifists. For centuries, the safety net to provide for the poorest in society was provided by the church, and churches offered sanctuary to those trying to escape legal injustices.

Most of the movements to provide education and healthcare and, more recently, other social provision have been started by Christians, usually taken on later by the state. It was Christians who challenged the evils of the slave trade. Although apartheid and racial injustices have often been built upon false biblical interpretations, Christians have been at the forefront of challenging and overcoming such views. Sadly, more recently, many would identify Christianity with preserving the



status quo and with nationalist philosophies, but Jesus can still be recognised in movements which break down barriers and build up people to reach their full potential. There can be many challenges to us, but many opportunities to recognise Jesus in Galilee of the Gentiles.

**What experiences do you have or meeting Jesus within an encounter with those of other faiths or other, non-Christian, worldviews?**

### 3 Galilee and Jerusalem

The late Bishop John V. Taylor, a former bishop of Winchester, gave a talk in Winchester Cathedral in 1975 entitled 'Christ at both ends of the line'.<sup>1</sup> Using the image of Galilee as where we conduct work and earn our living, he described Jerusalem as 'the safe stronghold of faith, where age-long forms of worship are offered'. Speaking to a congregation, including many who commuted to London, he compared the distance between London and Winchester with the distance between Galilee and Jerusalem and spoke of the lack of connection that many of us make between our working life and our faith and worship.

He spoke of a Christian friend who taught Business Studies who had run an exercise with a group of top executives, where they had options to 'invest or sell or buy out'; asking one participant, 'As you made that decision, which was uppermost in your mind: increasing profits, improving the product or benefiting the people?' The man responded that 'he had never once asked himself that question'. The businessman later got in touch with man running the exercise, to say that he had been deeply involved with church for years and no one had ever asked him that question, so he concluded that he had been wasting his time going to church and had now stopped going!

Bishop Taylor's talk also mentioned that same Business Studies lecturer being invited, by a vicar of a commuter belt church in Surrey, to raise such questions about business methods and how faith impacted upon their decision-making. The discussion became very angry and disturbed and the initiative of the vicar in setting up such discussions in this way wasn't appreciated. I am aware that the article that I am quoting from was written 45 years ago, but I think that the questions that it raises on how we can make connections between our everyday life and our faith are still deeply relevant. More specifically, we need to consider how churches can enable open and honest discussions to take place. If we are only prepared to look for Jesus in the Jerusalem of our church involvement, we won't have a chance to recognise him in the Galilee of our workplace.

My first ever job was in chemical textile research. We discharged a huge amount of chemical solution into the local drainage system; one of my projects was to look at how we could separate this into water, to be reused, and a more concentrated chemical solution to be discharged into the drains. In the same week, I managed to prove that the plant we were trying to use wasn't up to the job and also that there was a fallacy in the original calculations, so that the more efficient our production system was, the less efficient our recycling attempts would be. My project was abandoned and we continued to throw away all of our chemical effluent. I decided I couldn't be effective as a concerned Christian in industry and decided to work with people instead, leading to a



career in the charity section and then with Christian organisations.

In a church I belonged to for a few years in inner London there were people who had the freedom to choose the type of work they wanted to do, and those who, without the same educational advantages, had no options for choice. Among those who had choice, then nearly everyone was in the public or charity sector. People were social workers, probation officers, teachers, union representatives, health workers, charity or church workers, in public transport, local authority or civil servants. These people had found work that tied in with their Christian faith, but it wouldn't have been an easy church to feel at home within if you were working in the commercial or financial section when you moved into the area and joined.

At times I have revisited my decision to get out of industry; was it just taking the easier path? How do you resource yourself to be a committed Christian in industry, commerce or finance and be prepared to recognise and respond to the risen Jesus in the Galilee of your workplace? Christians do need to be working in these areas, to make difficult decisions and to weigh up the implications of their decisions on different people and groups and to be resourced by their churches as they make such decisions. Sometimes they will not make the best decision, and sometimes they will need to live with the consequences of their decisions and also of their indecisions. The risen Jesus said he would meet his disciples in Galilee. We need to be prepared to meet with Jesus in the Galilee of our working life, but how can our churches help their congregations in this task of recognising Jesus and responding appropriately to him in the work place?

But if meeting Jesus in Galilee is about our meeting him in our place of work, it isn't just about the 'product' that we are involved in; it is also about how we conduct ourselves. Working for a Christian organisation can be wonderful at one level, but it, too, can have its challenges. I've never particularly felt tempted to swear at colleagues, but have had to resist the temptation to patronisingly place my hand on someone's shoulder and say that I will pray for them! It can be very confusing when at one level you gather to pray and worship together as equals before the Lord, then immediately return to a hierarchical management structure to make decisions. Christians are also notorious for trying to suppress conflict and be nice to each other and also spiritualise issues. It is amazing how much damage can be done by not facing up openly to issues. Fortunately I think that recently there has been more emphasis by Christians on learning to disagree well and acknowledging the creative tension there can be within difference.

I remember a big decision-making residential event that CMS held. Being CMS the event was embedded in prayer, but also enabled by consultants with modern decision-making software. Key statements, that each of us had made, needed to be fed into some software but, because we had been too wordy, the consultants needed an hour to precis what we had said into the space available in the software. Being CMS, this delay was obviously a time for additional organised prayer.

The software worked well; we were able to look at several groups of statements and individually prioritise them against each other; the end result of doing this was that definite conclusions emerged from the process. The trouble was that some people noticed that their statements had not been included in the choices; their contributions had been taken out of the process. So which





paradigm were we working with? Was it entrusting the process to God through prayer, or to modern decision-making processes? Had the consultants just missed some of the contributions in their hurry to get the system up and running, or had God responded to our prayers for guidance by excluding or overruling certain contributions?

The above is just a snapshot of some issues and questions, some are not easy ones for individuals to answer, but through prayer, reading and encouraging churches to engage with the issues, we need to be finding ways to help us recognise and respond to the risen Jesus in the place which is Galilee for us.

### **What challenges have your work or other day-to-day activities presented to your faith?**

#### **Notes**

1. This and 39 more of his talks and articles were published posthumously in *The Incarnate God*, the Mowbray Lent Book for 2004.

## **4 Church of the Beatitudes**

What comes to our own minds when we think about Galilee? It is the place where Jesus had walked, preached and conducted miracles; Jesus had calmed the storm; he had also saved Peter when he tried to walk on the water and began sinking; and Jesus had enabled the disciples to make huge catches of fish. From my visits to Galilee, I find myself thinking about the sermon on the mount, and the Church of the Beatitudes. Galilee offers the opportunity for deep spiritual experiences. But with our deep spiritual experiences and experiences of church, we are not always on ground that is safe and secure; we can find ourselves faced with fallen-ness, ambiguity and compromise.

The Church of the Beatitudes is built on a slight mount, just above the Sea of Galilee, and is considered the likely site of the sermon on the mount (Matthew 5). It has an octagonal design, so that each side reflects one of the eight beatitudes; it is built in the neo-Byzantine style. It is a delightful peaceful setting, with gardens. The church was built between 1936 and 1938. Visiting there can be a very moving spiritual experience. That is, until you read the small print and realise that the building of the church was commissioned by the Fascist dictator Benito Mussolini. How do I hold together the beauty and peace of the location and the wonderful challenge of the beatitudes, with the evil of the man who commissioned the building of this church? Does it need a certain amount of ambiguity and compromise to do so?

This all came back to mind at a recent church group meeting. A scandal about a high-profile, international, Christian figure and writer had recently become public knowledge and, justifiably, there was disappointment and anger expressed within our group. It is not a question just for Christians and, with all that has come to light as a result of the recent #MeToo movement, there are huge questions about whether we can still appreciate the films directed by certain directors and the

music and paintings by certain artists, or whether their actions should override any appreciation we once had for their work. There is the further question of, even if we can still appreciate their work, whether we should allow ourselves to do so or is doing so affirming not just their artistic work but also their behaviour. What goes on in the world in general doesn't necessarily impact upon my faith, but issues going on in the church and Christianity should do so.

This moral question reminded me of a similar conversation that I had experienced with a group that I had taken to Galilee the year after my first visit to the Church of the Beatitudes. We were about to sing a particular, popular, chorus of that time about togetherness. One young lady said that she couldn't sing that chorus anymore because the writer of the chorus had recently left his wife. I asked the question as to whether she could still use the psalms of David in her worship. David had gone further than just using his position of power to commit adultery with Bathsheba, he had gone on to arrange for her husband, Uriah the Hittite, to be killed in war so that he could make the adulterous relationship with Bathsheba permanent (2 Samuel 11). Do we have the same problem in affirming the work and contribution of someone who has been dead for a number of years, David or Mussolini for example, compared with someone who is still alive or only recently dead?

A few of us in our church group use Morning Prayer regularly; the Old Testament readings that week were from Genesis, particularly focusing on the dubious behaviour of Jacob in his relationship with his brother, father and father-in-law. We went on to note that in the Old Testament God often had a habit of using seriously fallen individuals for his purposes. These reflections, which stem from visiting the Church of the Beatitudes, remind me that whatever else Galilee might be, it can be a place of ambiguity, compromise and moral questioning. If we can expect Jesus to meet us in Galilee, then we can expect him to meet us in the place of difficult moral decisions; in the places where we need to engage with taking stands, of ambiguity and of compromise. In particular, Galilee reminds me of the ambiguity and compromise that we often come across within the church.

If we are going to be able to recognise Jesus in our own Galilee, then we will need to work out how we approach such situations. Eventually I felt that God showed me the way forward with this problem. I had found myself looking at the church and its fallen-ness, rather than looking at Jesus. Returning to the Church of the Beatitudes, I needed to stop looking at the small print about the building, which says who commissioned it to be built, but look instead at the big print within the octagonal walls showing what Jesus actually said there.

### **Matthew 5:3-12<sup>1</sup>**

**Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven** – Being poor in spirit is about knowing my dependence upon God, acknowledging that it is not me who achieves anything on my own, but God who achieves through me. God only blesses my endeavours when I pray about them and seek his guidance.

**Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted** – Being able to mourn is not just about getting in touch with my own loss and pain, but being able to share in, understand and empathise with other people's loss and pain.





**Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth** - The third step in following Jesus is about my attitude; I need to be meek. In our postmodern world, Christianity is just one of many worldviews, and increasingly in a minority. Meekness means that through my lifestyle and actions I need to earn the right to be heard. Meekness is different from weakness and Jesus, as he journeys towards Jerusalem and the cross, provides a role model for us to act in humility and reflect his vulnerability.

**Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled** - Righteousness is about being in a right relationship with God. As Jesus and the Old Testament prophets remind us, righteousness includes being concerned about justice, peace and God's creation and being in right relationship with others. If I have really got in touch with people's pain and feelings, I realise that Jesus doesn't just want me to talk about issues and respond with the time and money I have left over; being in touch with pain and feelings should lead me to hunger and thirst for this righteousness.

**Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy** - The next step is, again, about my attitude; it can be grudging and judgemental. Jesus expects better of me. He reminds me of his grace, mercy and forgiveness and expects me to show grace, mercy and forgiveness to others.

**Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God** - Pureness of heart is the next step in the journey of following Jesus; it is about reflecting God's values and standing up for God's values. This can sound judgemental. But these steps are deliberately ordered to point the way. It is only when I have entered into the other person's pain and feelings and reminded myself of God's righteousness and mercy that I can, meekly, speak out about God's values.

**Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God** - Christians are often seen as being conflict avoiders, but we are called to be peacemakers; this involves embracing conflict and, as with the early church, affirming the creativity of difference. Those earlier steps of empathising with feelings combined with meekness, righteousness and mercy prepare us for this step towards a calling as peacemakers, a calling much needed in this day and age.

**Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you** - For Christians in many parts of the world, following these steps might lead to persecution. For us in the west, it is more likely to be a sense of marginalisation, confusion and ridicule; so Jesus reminds us that for those who follow this path, 'theirs is the kingdom of heaven'.

Yes. We will come across fallen-ness, ambiguity and compromise within our churches, but if we are able to look beyond these barriers, able to look at Jesus, we should be able to find that he is giving an example and teaching to bring to these situations.

**Thinking of occasions when you have been aware of fallen-ness, ambiguity or compromise**

## **within Christian institutions; how have these impacted upon your Christian life?**

### **Notes**

1. For a fuller understanding of what follows, read Steven Croft, *Jesus' People: What the church should do next* (Church House Publishing, 2009).

### **5 Déjà vu**

Reading about the seven disciples going fishing (John 21:1-8) made me wonder if any of them were actually any good at fishing. We first come across four of them (Luke 5:3-11), when they had experienced an equally unsuccessful night's fishing. As well as these two stories, we also know that Peter was instructed to catch just one fish (Matthew 17:24-27) and remove the coin in its mouth to pay the Temple Tax. If we just take the gospel narratives, the only times Peter seems to be able to catch any fish is when he closely follows Jesus' instructions. All four gospels have stories of Jesus calling the first disciples. In Matthew (4:18-22) and Mark (1:16-20) they are described as fishermen, but no mention is made of the unsuccessful night's fishing. In John, Jesus is picking up some of John the Baptist's disciples (John 1:35-40).

Although placed at completely different ends of the gospel accounts, there are certain similarities between the unsuccessful accounts of the night's fishing in Luke and John's stories to wonder if they are two version of the same event; but there are also significant differences. In Luke 5 there are four (potential) disciples in two boats. In John's account there are seven disciples in one boat and they catch a large, but precise, number of fish. In both accounts, they almost lose the entire catch because there are so many fish.

Let us assume that they are separate events, but with enough similarities for Peter to gain a real sense of déjà vu. Following instructions, Peter and the other disciples have gone back to Galilee, where Jesus has said that he will meet the disciples (Matthew 28:7; Mark 16:7; Luke 24:6). Peter, never one to hang around, initiates the fishing expedition. Whether there is any significance in the fact that they are operating without Jesus' presence or not, we don't know but, as on the night before they were called by Jesus to be disciples, they catch nothing. In both stories they follow the advice of the unknown stranger on the shore and are successful in catching a lot of fish; so many that you might expect the net to break, but it doesn't. John points out to Peter that the unknown stranger is the Lord and Peter dresses himself before hurrying ahead into the water to meet with Jesus.

Much has been made of the exact number, 153 fish. Was 153 the number of different types of fish? Was 153 the number of different nations? Was the number 153 a way of proving that it was a huge catch? Was 153 the actual number of fish that they caught? We don't know.

What might be going through Peter's head as he recognises Jesus and experiences a sense of déjà



vu, with his previous events described by Luke? There might be an understanding of how much he depends upon following Jesus' instructions to achieve anything; there will certainly be a reminder of how Jesus called him to follow him and to be a fisher of men. But there could also have been another sense of déjà vu at work here. Smell can act as an amazing trigger to our senses and to our memories. We are reminded (John 21:14) that this was the third time that the risen Jesus had revealed himself to the disciples. This comment carries its own significance because it was Peter, standing warming himself beside another charcoal fire, who had denied Jesus three times in the high priest's courtyard after Jesus' arrest (John 18:17-27).

These déjà vu experiences will remind Peter of the Jesus that he committed himself to follow and that he went on to deny; we will go on to explore the outworking of this in the next section and see that second time around the lakeside meeting between Peter and Jesus is a much deeper occasion that will have lifelong consequences. But do we rediscover memories of previously meeting Jesus within our own moments of déjà vu and, if so, what will be the discoveries and implications for us?

You may be able to recall your own déjà vu experiences, where a certain situation has made you recall Jesus at work in your life at a previous time. If so, are there things to be learnt from the memories? Peter would have been reminded of the affirmation of his calling to be a fisher of men, but also of how, despite all of his bluster that he would never deny Jesus, he did go on to let Jesus down. You may want to bring to mind some of the ups and downs of your Christian journey and prayerfully invite Jesus to meet you within your re-examination of those events.

When I think about Peter's denial of Jesus, in the high priest's garden, I am aware that, unlike the other disciples, at least Peter was brave enough to follow Jesus that far. When I do this, I realise how easy it is for me to try to justify myself, to Jesus, about my own failings. Am I able to recall, before Jesus, the ways in which I have let Jesus down without trying to justify myself and my actions? If I do that, then I can begin to seek his forgiveness. If I am justifying myself instead, then I am not really seeking forgiveness and, subsequently, unable to be forgiven. Can I bring past events to Jesus, which I feel confused or ambiguous about, so that if I find myself in a similar situation in future I can feel more confident about the right way forward?

Try to recall your first meeting with Jesus, the first time that you recognised who he was and the implications that he had upon your life then. How do you view that encounter now? Are there questions that you can prayerfully ask him now or things that you want to offer to him now which relate to that experience?

Peter denied Jesus three times, in the high priest's garden. He went on to be commissioned three times by the lakeside. Before Peter meets with Cornelius's men (Acts 10:9-16), Peter has the threefold dream. Peter recognises the pattern and realises that a dream that raises the same question three times fits into how Jesus communicates with him. Are there any patterns that we can see within our meetings with Jesus? All of these exercises can help prepare us better to recognise, and respond to, the risen Jesus when he next tries to catch our attention.

**What lessons are there from meeting Jesus in past situations which could help you**



**recognise and respond to him in the future?**

## **6 Forgiveness of sins**

One of the central themes of Easter is Jesus dying on the cross to bring about the forgiveness of our sins. Not surprisingly, for Peter, the outworking of this is beside the Sea of Galilee – Galilee having been the place of his everyday work as a fisherman. The culmination of this is found in John 21:15-17, but the narrative really begins on Maundy Thursday with the Last Supper and the events that follow this. My reflections upon Peter and forgiveness also began one Maundy Thursday.

My main recreation, and opportunity for creative reflection, is cycling, and, in anticipation of some better weather and opportunities for cycling over the Easter weekend, I decided to clean my bike one Maundy Thursday afternoon. There were several hundred miles of winter muck, mud and grease on the bike when I started to clean it. When I finished cleaning it, the bike was spotless and gleaming, but I was filthy with the muck that had been on the bike. Fortunately, as with Jesus washing the disciples feet before the last supper (John 13:4-11), I had taken off my 'outer robe' and I had put my old work clothes on instead. We will be familiar with this reading and often with the enactment of the foot washing and the reminder that we are all called to sacrificial servanthood.

We might well be familiar with the resistance that most people have to being one of the ones whose feet are washed. The women will often choose to wear trousers over tights, to give a modest excuse to avoid taking part. If we know that we have been chosen as a 'volunteer', then the best option is to wash our feet carefully beforehand, spray them with an antiperspirant and put clean socks on. Hopefully the weather is warm enough to get away with sandals over the socks so there is no chance of further sweating and smelly feet. If we have had this experience, and any of these feelings, we will empathise with Peter's reaction of not wanting Jesus to wash his feet for him.

To understand fully what is going on, it is worth exploring another bit of washing that goes on later that night; the bit of washing that has given us the term 'to wash my hands' of a responsibility. When Pilate washes his hands (Matthew 27:24) it is not to remove physical dirt, but to express that he is innocent of Jesus' death. Pilate, and we must assume most within that society, saw a very clear link with physical washing and taking away guilt. When Peter makes the connection and accepts Jesus' offer to wash his feet, he wants to opt for the full bath; well, at least his head and hands as well. Jesus reassures him of the symbolism of the act and that once you have been bathed by Jesus you do not need to wash again.

At the heart of the story of Jesus washing Peter's feet and his, and our, reluctance to have our feet washed is the fact that, however much we may want to and try to, we cannot take away our own sin. Only Jesus can do that for us. Unfortunately, my bicycle cannot clean itself; it needs me take away its dirt and in doing so I get dirt upon myself. We need Jesus to take away our dirt, our sin, and, in the process of cleansing us, he takes on our sin. The Old Testament concept of the scapegoat is found in Leviticus 16:8-10, where atonement for the nation's unintentional sins is achieved by heaping them upon a goat which is then released into the wilderness, to take that sin away.



The story of Jesus washing feet gives a graphical representation of Jesus taking away the dirt of others, by taking it upon himself, and prepares us for the events of Good Friday, where Jesus, bearing our sins, dies on the cross for our forgiveness. There are various ways in which we can understand the atonement; different understandings will resonate in different ways with different people and all contribute to the divine mystery of our understanding of the cross and resurrection.

The account of the foot washing gives us one theoretical interpretation of atonement, but the events beside the Sea of Galilee reveal the outworking of this in Peter's life. Here, beside another charcoal fire, next to the Sea of Galilee, there is the threefold questioning of Peter as to whether he loves Jesus 'more than these' (John 21:15-17). Peter feels hurt, because Jesus repeats the question twice more. But the threefold questioning resonates with the threefold denial. The sin in question is clearly recognised by Peter and, with the commissioning of Peter to feed Jesus' sheep, Peter is empowered in his role within the disciples. Our deep-down understanding of being forgiven by Jesus doesn't just lie within our words of confession and the promise of forgiveness, but is proven by being given new tasks to do by Jesus. The final word on the subject is Jesus' instruction to Peter 'follow me'.

Sin is about the breakdown of our relationship with God, with other people and with God's creation. It also includes the breakdown of the relationship we have with ourselves. We carry our guilt and are aware of our unworthiness. Because of this, we can cause all sorts of problems for ourselves and stop ourselves from functioning properly, and reaching our potential in God. We can easily find ourselves trying to earn our forgiveness and our salvation. If this is the case, then any commission that we think that we receive from Jesus can become confused and we are responding out of guilt, not out of love. If we are not assured that we have really been forgiven, then it is very difficult to clearly hear the words that Jesus said to Peter and to follow.

Returning to the foot washing, after Jesus has taken away the dirt on the disciples, he tells them to wash one another's feet. In seeing this just as an instruction to servanthood, we easily miss the deeper meaning. We are instructed by Jesus to be involved in taking away the sins of others. Jesus, who takes sin upon himself by cleansing us from our sin, instructs us to also be involved in taking away sin; this will sometimes involve us in getting mucky.

I remember visiting a Christian centre in Hong Kong, many years ago. It was an old Buddhist monastery, where the Buddhist community has converted en masse to Christianity decades beforehand. It had become a resource for research into other faiths and sects and work with other faiths. The baptismal font was in the shape of a lotus leaf, a symbol of purity in Buddhism. This imagery, and other Buddhist imagery, had been absorbed into the design of the centre and the centre felt it had been successful in sharing Christianity with Buddhists. The lady running the centre spoke openly of the criticism that they had received from some Christians over the years suggesting that in using Buddhist imagery they had compromised their Christian beliefs. She didn't criticise the critics in return, but acknowledged that in trying to follow Jesus within the complexities of the modern world they might have occasionally got it wrong but, if they had, she believed that Jesus would understand and forgive them.

If we follow Jesus, and try to wash away the sin of the world among some of the complexities of our



world, then we might easily find that we are taking on some of the sin of the world. But if we are truly trying to follow him, then we will find that he continues to wash away our sin.

**In what ways do you feel assured of God's forgiveness in your life? How has this freed you up to help bring God's forgiveness to others?**