

Acts 9.1-20
Revelation 5.11-14
John 21.1-19
Easter 3
Great St Mary's
4th May 2025

Some years ago my mother had double cataracts surgery. At the post-operative check-up, her surgeon asked her how she was.

“Terrible”, she said.

He looked alarmed.

“What’s wrong?” he asked. “Has it not worked?”

“Well”, she said. “I look around my house and I can see just how dirty it is. I can see how the carpets all need replacing. And I look in the mirror and I see an old lady staring back at me.”

Being able to see more clearly can be scary. It can also change us.

In our gospel passage, the disciples are out fishing. When Jesus calls to them, although they see him, they don’t recognise him. Only when they follow his instructions and land a massive haul of fish – which they’ve been unable to do for themselves - do they see more clearly and realise who it is.

Throughout the gospels, fish play a leading role in Jesus’ ministry. It is while catching fish that Jesus calls his first disciples. He turns a fishing boat into a floating pulpit. There are not one but two stories of Jesus multiplying a few fish and loaves to feed thousands of people. In Luke’s gospel, after he has been resurrected, Jesus proves that it’s him by eating a piece of broiled fish in front of them.

In John’s gospel, the story of the miraculous catch of fish appears after Jesus has been resurrected. In two of the other gospels - Luke and Matthew - there’s also an account of a miraculous catch of fish, similar to this story, but it appears much earlier in the relationship between Jesus and his disciples. We’re not exactly sure whether it’s the same story, remembered differently, or whether there was more than one happening. Either way, you could say that fish are Jesus’ love language for the disciples.

For the disciples are fishermen. Fish are what they know. Fish is what they do. And when Jesus comes along, he messes with fish. He disrupts all things fishy. He commands fish to swim where they never normally swim. In quantities in which they don’t normally swim. At times of day and on sides of the boat when they don’t normally swim. So eventually the disciples see that if something strange is going on with the fish, then something very strange is happening to the world.

Jesus changes how the disciples see everything differently through what he does with fish.

Jesus also changes the way Saul sees.

At the beginning of our reading Saul is full of hate towards Jesus’ disciples and plotting to capture them. (He has recently witnessed and been complicit in the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr). But then suddenly in a flash of light he has a vision of Jesus and everything changes for him. The vision blinds him for days. Once he is healed by one of the disciples (who is understandably reluctant to do so at first) he is then totally transformed by recognising Jesus as the Son of God.

Both of these passages reveal to us deep truths about the nature of resurrection through the eyes of those who encounter Jesus face to face.

Our passage from the Book of Revelation continues the revelation, where John has a vision of heaven, in which heaven and earth unite to worship Jesus, the Lamb of God, around God's heavenly throne.

This season of Easter is a feast. During this season we are invited to feast not just on post-Easter chocolate but to dwell in that vision of resurrection. This morning's visions are rich fare. For they are intended not simply to be stories that we listen to but scriptures in which we are active participants.

John's gospel was designed not simply to be heard but actively to engage us; we are invited to be transported to the beach and to feast on fish with Jesus' followers. We are invited to see Jesus afresh; to hear him call us and to experience all over again being recognised, being known.

When we encounter God, that is what happens. We have this sense of being known and – usually to our great surprise – being loved for who we are.

This seeing of God changes us. It turned Jesus' friends from fearful cowardly traitors to brave martyrs. Then it turned Saul from being their persecutor to being their ally and a chief advocate.

For all of them, it started with taking a closer look. Some, like Saul, don't appear to be willing to try. They experience God up close and personal, meeting them head-on and turning their lives around.

Others – the mystics, for instance – make it their lifetime's work, devoting patient years to paying attention, to looking, to searching.

But all of us, even if we don't think of ourselves as either martyrs or mystics, in our worship today are invited into this mystery. We may not have seen Jesus in the flesh, face to face but we feast today on bread and wine, as the disciples feasted on fish. We may not have had the dramatic encounter that Saul did on the road to Damascus but we see the face of Christ in each other as we stand shoulder to shoulder. We may not have had a mystical vision of heaven like John describes in the book of Revelation but as we sing we unite our songs with the song of the angels and the whole of creation.

This is not abstract. It is not just a foretaste of things to come: it is happening now. When we worship together as the Body of Christ we are drawn into eternity, we step into the splendour of the presence of God. We join with the heavenly throng, the host on high that worship around God's throne night and day. It might not always feel like that because it's not about us as individuals but as the Body of Christ. Maybe you don't like the hymns. Or the organ voluntary. Or the sermon. But that's not the point. When we worship together we are collectively part of something much bigger. That vision that John describes in Revelation is a vision of worship in which we here at Great St Mary's, together with the rest of the Body of Christ on earth and all the heavenly host, are engaging right now.

Our worship together enables us to see God, not necessarily with our eyes but in our souls.

And as we do so, our vision will change. Maybe in blinding flashes. Maybe inexorably slowly.

And we will find ourselves being drawn not further away from the world and its wonders and woes but rather much more deeply into it.

For those who are prepared to venture more deeply into it, this contemplative prayer of the mystic is a form of intense seeing. If you find yourself just staring at things sometimes – leaves on the trees, sparkly water, or candles, or whatever, then maybe you too are drawn to mysticism, to that contemplation of the world which leads to seeing the world very differently. If this sounds appealing,

then I'd recommend exploring it further. You could start with Brian McLaren's website, the Action for Contemplation and Action, which provides a way of looking at the world differently, which enables you to see it with love. As Evelyn Underhill notes in her book *Practical Mysticism*, it is those who are drawn to this deep contemplation who are often most engaged in seeking to make it a better place:

[It drew] St Francis of Assisi to the practical experience of that poverty which he recognised as the highest wisdom; St. Catherine of Siena from contemplation to politics; Joan of Arc to the salvation of France; St. Teresa to the formation of an ideal religious family; Fox to the proclaiming of a world-religion in which all men should be guided by the Inner Light; Florence Nightingale to battle with officials, vermin, dirt, and disease in the soldiers' hospitals; Octavia Hill to make in London slums something a little nearer "the shadows of the angels' houses" than that which the practical landlord usually provides.

We may be tempted to despair of the world right now and wonder what good deep prayer serves. But it is precisely when the world seems full of trouble and chaos that this kind of seeing is needed. We may feel helpless in the face of it all but most of all our world needs people who will look more closely and will pay it lovingly prayerful attention.

Scripture provides us with an active way of seeing beyond the words on the page. Scripture speaks to us as powerfully today as it did when it was first set down. It is in this collective listening to Scripture that we see more deeply.

(As an aside, if your love language is numbers and numerology (as it is for one of the members of our household), there is much written about the significance of the number of the fish, which is precisely numbered as 153. Does that number happen to mean anything to anyone, particularly any mathematicians? If I were to give you a clue, I would say: 17. Well, very briefly, 153 is a triangular number. What this means is that if you draw an equilateral triangle with dots, start with the number 1, then below it you will have 2 dots, then 3, then 4 and you keep adding the totals, then by the time you get to 17 the total will be 153.

Now some scholars believe that this kind of numerology would have been really obvious to those for whom the gospel of John was first written. Several scholars believe that there are different symbolic meanings to this which are deliberately incorporated into John's gospel. For instance, the number 17 may symbolise something important about the totality of the nations of the world, that it links in with a passage from Ezekiel and that what it means is that all the nations of the world will be saved. If you want to read a good summary, look up Ian Paul's article on Psephizo.

It may be that, as our vision gets clearer, we – like my mother with her newly restored vision – are more disturbed by what we see. But the exciting thing is that the closer we look at Jesus, the more we will see and be changed.