St Peter the Fisherman – Whitianga
May 1st Jesus appears again to the disciples

E te Atua aroha, e te Atua atawhai, kia whakapainga koe.
(God of love, God of grace, we give you thanks.

Today’s gospel text follows straight on after last week’s piece. Jesus’ patience with his disciples sometimes defies belief. Here we are, obviously very soon after his double appearance to them, giving his instruction to go forth and spread the good news about him to everyone they meet – and what does this happy little bunch do? They go fishing! I have to say it don’t I! That is such a guy thing.

(Fishing and Jesus on the beach)

Simon Peter, Thomas, Nathanael, Zebedee’s sons, and two other disciples (one of whom seems to be John), went off together, fishing (John 21:2). Instead of racing off to start their new missionary work, they returned to their previous vocation, but clearly had been unsuccessful. So, they head back to shore with empty nets after a wasted night.

Did (a) nothing stick, out of their meeting with the resurrected Jesus? Or (b) were they so short of provisions they had to delay their start as missionaries until they got some food? I think we have to hope the answer was B.

And there stands Jesus. I’m sort of pleased he couldn’t resist gently pointing out the obvious to them – “You have no fish have you?” “Ah – No” is the somewhat sheepish reply. I’m hoping he had a bit of a smile on his face. His call to them is to go back out and try again. He tells them to put the nets out on the right side of the boat.

(boat of fish and Peter)

They follow his instructions (verse 4-6), and of course, just about sink their boat with the weight of the catch. Significantly, the writer says the disciples did not know who he was at first, but they still accepted his suggestion, and went back out. There must have been something more about this man than just the eternal optimism held by all fishermen, that the next time the net is cast, there will be fish. This whole scene is a delightful picture of these chosen ones who were to start this ministry which eventually spread all over the world. When John points out their new fishing guru is actually Jesus, Simon Peter, yes, our man, in his typically impetuous way, can’t wait for the boat to reach the shore, even though it wasn’t far out, but dresses himself, and jumps into the sea.

Somehow, I’m unconvinced he really thought that through. Him fully clothed, trying to swim faster than the boat which was being rowed by the others?

Not only has Jesus turned up – again (a third time following his resurrection), – he’s on the shore, cooking them breakfast. However, this wasn’t just a friendly get together. Jesus as always, has the bigger picture in mind. It is at this meal that they receive a **recommissioning** from him. They are reminded who they are, and what they were originally called to be. They had effectively been challenged to get back in the boat and try again — in more ways than one. Noting quietly that they will do a lot better with Jesus’ help than on their own. Worth reflecting on – yes?

This event shares similarities with Luke’s account of the disciples on the road to Emmaus “recognising” the stranger/Resurrected One in their midst when he broke the bread. In this case, once they had gathered in their huge catch, which was only achieved because of Jesus’ help and advice.

(Jesus and Peter)

The second part of this passage is related to Peter and his relationship to Jesus. Peter is mentioned first as the disciple initiating the fishing expedition and is certainly back on the shore. This now allows for a conversation of great importance. Earlier, Peter had denied Jesus three times (18:17, 25-27). In this exchange, Jesus effectively reinstates Peter into the fold by asking him three times to take care of his sheep (verse 15-17). Peter’s importance is reinforced, and his death foretold (verse 19).

Amid the memory of those denials, Jesus “tests” the depth of Peter’s confession, almost as if he does not know Peter’s heart in the matter. This is baffling, hard to believe, even hurtful to Peter (John 21:17c), just as it would be to us: God knows all things, why should this be hidden from God?

As this exchange occurs, the other disciples, who had been so present in the fishing scene, disappear from the text. John was emphasising that the church, without Jesus physically present, needed Peter as the rock Jesus intended him to be. The call to “feed my sheep” — to love and lead Jesus’ followers — is an important moment for the next step in the church to come (verse 15-17).

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Looking at the other gospels, Mark rings down the curtain on his Gospel before a single human being has as yet shared the news of the resurrection.

Luke gives us a memorable post-resurrection story on the Road to Emmaus that happened that first Easter day but then rather swiftly fast-forwards to an exceedingly brief account of the ascension 40 days later.

Matthew gives us just a handful of verses, almost an afterthought is all that he offers post-Easter.

(Jesus cooking fish)

John wins hands down in terms of the post-Easter Jesus. And yet look at what he gives us: Jesus tending a campfire on a beach! Challenging reading, as the last place I’d expect to find the resurrected Lord of lords hanging around, is an isolated stretch of beach, and the last thing I’d expect to find him doing in that remote place is frying fish and cooking bread. We get no more parables, no more sermons (on a mount or anywhere else), no more walking on water or opening a blind person’s eyes. Instead across the first dozen or more verses of this story Jesus just says some very basic things:

“Catch anything?” “Come and have breakfast.”

Nothing earth-shattering there.

Attempts to complexify this story end up ruining it. We are so desperate to imbue the resurrected Jesus with cosmic meaning that we balk at letting him show up in so ordinary a circumstance, performing so common a set of tasks. But isn’t that where we need to encounter the Saviour, too? We don’t need only a stained-glass Jesus, who is other-worldly and who speaks words only meant for the holiest and most obviously sacred of events and occasions. We need a Jesus in the kitchen, on the beach and at the office, in the car with us and while shopping at the supermarket. We need a Saviour who accompanies us on our everyday journeys, who sees us in those ordinary circumstances, and who speaks into those times and places, too.

I’m quite content with the Jesus on the beach, tending a fire, sizzling some fresh fish, and saying to his friends, “Have some breakfast.”  True enough, Jesus’ extending his forgiving grace to the disciple who had so fiercely denied Jesus so as to save his own skin, is a vital part of this story. But I’d argue that it, too, is part of the larger commonplace nature of this narrative—even Peter’s restoration emerges not from an incredibly spectacular context but, as it were, around the breakfast table. How comforting to see Jesus accept Peter as he is, warts and foibles and feet-of-clay and all, but still love him and forgive him and restore him. That surely gives hope to the rest of us.

Amen