

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Eastertide (C)

4<sup>th</sup> May 2024

'The many lessons at Tabgha'

Acts 5: *the God of our ancestors raised up Jesus*

Ps 29: *I will praise You, Lord, You have rescued me*

Apoc 5: *The Lamb that was sacrificed is worthy of riches and power ...*

Jn 21: 1–19: *Who are You? They knew it was the Lord*

Last Saturday, travelling between a wedding I'd just celebrated, and the wedding reception — about half an hour's drive through the Norfolk countryside — I was taking some Newman-House students with me, as passengers. The drive quickly became a quiz-Fr-Philip session, and I spent the whole journey answering questions about Canons and Cardinals and Conclaves. I offered them the option of a seminar on the rituals of papal deaths and elections, when we arrived, in place of the wedding dinner, but funnily enough there was no take-up for that.

I'm sure we're all aware that the Conclave to elect the new Pope begins this Wednesday afternoon, bringing to a close the days since Pope Francis's death, in which we have prayed for the late Pope, experienced his lying-in-state and his funeral — some of you even went to Rome for that, well done! — then the *novemdiales* of official mourning and Masses for the late Pontiff; and the general

congregations of the c. 200 Cardinals as they gather in Rome for decisions and discussions ahead of the Conclave of 133 of them (Cardinal Electors). For probably the first time in history we happen to have 4 English Cardinals, 3 of whom are under 80 and eligible to enter the Conclave — one of them is our own Archbishop of Westminster, of course, Cardinal Vincent Nichols; we pray for them as they take part in this sacred and solemn exercise of their ministry as Cardinals. Another of them, only elevated to the College of Cardinals back in December, is the Dominican friar and former Master of the Order, Timothy Radcliffe. I mention him, because back in the autumn I followed very closely [his 4 reflections preached](#) before the Synod got going at the Vatican. The Scripture texts he took for those meditations on how to approach the Synod — and indeed how to approach evangelization in general — were the last two chapters of St John's Gospel, chs. 20 & 21, two talks on each chapter. They were mesmerizingly beautiful and insightful, and I have read and re-read them since. There was a particular resonance for me, as I had

chosen the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of Jn 21 as the Gospel reading for my Silver Jubilee Mass last summer, as I tried to put into perspective, in the Lord's sight, my vocation, my 25 yrs a priest, and whatever more years of priestly ministry He allots me henceforth.

Jn 20 & 21 are the chapters concerning the *Resurrection of Jesus*. The Gospel seems to finish once, at the end of Jn 20, after Jesus's two appearances to the Apostles, a week apart in Jerusalem, and His reassuring 'doubting Thomas' that He was truly alive — we had those passages the past two Sundays. But then the text of Jn's Gospel resumes with an astonishingly rich chapter that none of us, I think, would wish to be without: Jn 21, from which we hear today: the Lord's appearing to them once more, this time in Galilee, back by the shores of the Sea of Tiberias where it all began. It's an event full of emotion as they reconvene in the very place where several of them were called by Jesus 3 yrs before, away from their families and their fishing boats, to come and follow Him without knowing all the joy, and suffering, that it would mean.

I've been to the traditional spot where this is thought to have occurred. It's called Tabgha, between the little lakeside towns of Capernaum and Magdala; it's a tranquil spot where one can go right down to the water's edge, and peacefully contemplate Our Lord's many times on and by this Sea of Galilee. I said Mass there, at one of the little outdoor altars provided, when I was last in the Holy Land in October 2018 — it was the feast of Pope St John Paul II, and I was given by chance the JP II altar! — and at that place I remember praying for the many priests I know, friends and diocesan brother priests, in their mission for Christ's Church. There's a statue there commemorating the moving encounter of Jesus with Peter that we heard of at the end of the passage today: Our Lord challenges Peter; He forgives him; and He entrusts him once again with the leadership of the Church and the protection of its Mission.

This occasion, recounted in the very last chapter of St John's Gospel, provides a fitting culmination to that Gospel, and there's so much for us to take in at this point of Eastertide, and on the brink of a papal Conclave. First,

it provides us again with the reassuring appearance of the risen Lord. He keeps wishing to strengthen the apostles — and us — with evidence for His being risen, truly alive, and undying. His appearance is, as you might have noticed, rather different from that before His crucifixion and death — the apostles know Him, but sometimes they are unsure. From the boat they don't realise that it's Jesus, even though they are only 100m from land. It's not always his *appearance* that they immediately recognise, but His voice, His words, His attitude, His kindness to them: it's St John, his keen relationship of love with the Lord that acknowledges "*it is the Lord!*" I suppose one could say, Jesus is moving into *a new relationship* to them, for quite soon He will not be seen by them at all, once He ascends to the Father again. It's not His physical recognition that will be important, but His undying divine love for them, His immortal Spirit given to them, and the Sacraments too.

*Speaking of the Sacraments* ... It's quite clear that in a number of the Resurrection appearances Our Lord alludes to, reinforces, or even re-enacts, the liturgical ritual

that He instituted at the Last Supper, namely the Eucharist. Here, too, by the shores of Lake Galilee, with the charcoal fire burning (and reminding Peter, no doubt, also of the charcoal fire at the High Priest's house where he denied Jesus three times) He does the same: "*take and eat!*" Jesus is showing the apostles that they cannot live a life apart from Him, and that they are dependent, too, for spiritual nourishment from Him. There is no way that they will live now except in special relationship with Him. There is no going back to everything as it was before His ministry with them; there's no going back to fishing: even when they try, they fail! Had He died and not risen, maybe so, maybe it was back to Lake Galilee to pick up their old lives again ... *But not now* — not now that He has risen and shown them the life beyond the grave, and *proved* to them His divinity.

With Peter in a most particular way, as leader of the apostles, He makes this clear: there's a new beginning, a new and bold start from Lake Galilee that is even more glorious than the first new start 3 yrs earlier. Here, in this gravely poignant moment, Peter is forgiven for his denials,

and he is given charge of leading the flock of Christ, “Feed my sheep.” The mission Jesus is sending them out on is a difficult one — He does not hide the fact — and they will give their lives in martyrdom, most of them; but it is the most blessed and greatest vocation possible, to take the Gospel of Jesus to the ends of the earth.

So, this wonderful moment at Lake Galilee — full of such *intense* loving — gives the apostles so much to take to heart, and us too. It’s ...

1. another proof of the **absolute truth of Jesus’s rising** from the dead;
2. a reminder that **we are nothing without Him**, doomed to a superficial life if we do not embrace the spiritual life that He is offering us;
3. reinforcing the **centrality of the Eucharist** in our relationship with Jesus, His very personal gift of Himself in the actions of the Holy Mass;
4. an encouragement that when we fail we have **the tenderness of His forgiveness**, and His confidence in us to be His witnesses, despite our weakness;
5. **a command to be missionaries**, to do His will, to spread

His Gospel, to speak and act as Christians at all times, to the end of our lives ... and for some, that means to be His martyrs, the ultimate sacrifice of love.

Finally, then, what of the Conclave? By this time next week we’ll probably have a new Pope. One of those 133 Cardinals entering the Conclave in red will emerge from it in white. What will they be thinking at Mass today as they listen to Jn 21: “*When you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go*”! Surely each of them has the faith to know that the Lord who strengthened the first Peter, and who told him who said that he loved Him to “*feed My sheep*” will also strengthen the new Peter, and help him to do the same: to “*follow Me*” without fear, to “*feed My sheep*” without fail. Let me end with a quotation from Cardinal Radcliffe, from those Synod meditations of his on Jn 21: he said, “*the Petrine ministry of unity is not policing God’s wayward children; it is revealing the attractiveness of the Lord, who draws us together.*”

*Jesus, Risen Lord who loved Peter, give us in Your love a new Peter for Your Church.*