

**Easter 3, 10 April 2016**

**John 21.1-19**

**A sermon preached by Nick Moir**

Last Sunday the Moir family were in Wells Cathedral, next to which stands the Bishop's palace, still the home of the Bishop of Bath & Wells – though he nowadays is relegated to the servants' wing whilst Joe Public enjoys perambulating around his house and estate. Being sometimes a bear of little brain it had never occurred to me why Wells is so called, but there they were in the bishop's garden, a group of pools fed by underwater springs supplying plenty of water for the bishop and his household. Early in the twentieth century someone poured dye into some potholes on the overlooking Mendip hills; a few days later the moat around the bishop's palace had turned green. The water had found its way underground and then by some natural mechanism I don't understand was forced up into the wells and flowed onwards. Such is the quantity of water that it does not just supply the bishop's palace but there is a branch that runs out beside the cathedral and into the high street where it at least used to supply the whole city - and the channel along the high street is still here, a bit like Hobson's conduit in this city.

It reminded me of when we turned this church into a great stream or river, the water flowing out of the Jerusalem temple at this end with a real pool down here and flowing out, not quite so realistically, down the aisle.

Every year at our evening celebration of St Andrew's Day we read the passage from Ezekiel 47 that was, in part, the inspiration for that river. In it the prophet foresees an age when the river of God would flow out of the temple in a restored Jerusalem down into the valley where the trees grow along the banks whose leaves are for healing – and into the Sea of Arabah, what we call the Dead Sea, which is so full of slat that nothing can live in it. But in Ezekiel's vision the river of God makes it fresh because, as he says, 'everything will live where the river goes' and 'there will be very many fish'. 'People will stand fishing beside the sea from En-gedi to En-eglaim; it will be a place for the spreading of nets; its fish will be of a great many kinds, like the fish of the Great Sea.'

This vision is too dreamy and mystical to be taken literally; it is a vision of life flowing out from the centre of Judaism to the world beyond, to the nations. It may be even that the great variety of fish are representative of the nations in all their diversity and numerousness. The Jewish people historically didn't have much to do with fish; the only time they are recorded as eating it in the OT is when they were in Egypt. The Dead Sea didn't produce it; the only great quantities were further up the Jordan at the Sea of Galilee in the north of the country. Traditionally the Jewish people were neither fishermen nor cultivators of the soil but semi-nomadic pastoralists, keepers of sheep and goats. They viewed their kings and priests as shepherds of the people and sang of their God as a great shepherd of the sheep. But Jesus chose as his leading apostles not shepherds but fishermen. Perhaps that is a hint that their task was to reach beyond the sheep of Israel to the fish of the nations, the Gentiles: they were to become fishers of people.

Now we need to do a bit of mathematics. You might think that what I am about to suggest is a bit far-fetched – and, if so, I admire your scepticism. The internet world is full of bizarre theories about what I am about to talk about and you are right to look unconvinced so I won't take it personally if your eyebrows begin to arch in the next minute or two – but see me out, and give me the slack of going away and thinking about it. It's about numbers – numbers in the bible are very often significant and they attached far more significance to them than we do. So 12 is the number of Israel, the twelve tribes. In

Mark's first feeding miracle, the feeding of the 5000, the disciples gather in 12 basketsful; two chapters later Jesus has moved to the more remote Gentile region of Galilee, the scene of the feeding of the 4000. There the disciples collect seven basketsful. Seven is the number of the Gentiles, the nations – the number of the tribes expelled from Promised land by the children of Israel: Deuteronomy 7 – 'the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, seven nations mightier and more numerous than you'. (Incidentally, 70 is also a number of the Gentiles, based on the seventy nations descended from Noah that are recorded in Genesis 10). In John 21, how many disciples go fishing? Simon Peter, Thomas, Nathanael, the two sons of Zebedee and two others – that is, seven. How many fish do they catch? 153. In fact it says, 153 large fish. This is a big catch of big fish – only possible when the disciples cease to do it on their own but do so in the presence of, and guided by, Jesus. Why 153? Well, perhaps that's what they counted and that's what they remembered. But wouldn't you be more likely to say 'about 150' or perhaps just 'a lot'.

There are loads of theories about the significance of the number and most of them are probably bonkers – but here's one first suggested by the late Professor John Emerton back in 1958. John Emerton, incidentally, only died last year and Rosalind and I went to his memorial service only a month or two ago in St John's College Chapel. John was an ordained fellow of St John's, we knew him well – and he was for many years Regius Professor of Hebrew. Hebrew and Greek letters are also numbers. In the book of Revelation the number of the beast is 666 – most scholars think that this number is got by adding together the numerical values of the words Nero Caesar, the emperor who first unleashed unspeakable persecution upon the early Christians in Rome. By a similar method if you add together the letters in the names of the two springs mentioned by Ezekiel where people are fishing in the sea of Arabah – you get for En-ge-di 17 and for En-Eglaim 153. There is actually a relationship between these two numbers as 153 is a triangular number, that is it is the sum of 1,2,3,4,5, all the way of to... 17.

Perhaps John is telling us that here on the sea of Galilee Ezekiel's vision is being fulfilled. The message has gone out from Jerusalem and the Gentiles, the nations, are being gathered in, vast numbers of them, in all their diversity. And as they are gathered in Jesus shares a meal with them and makes himself known to them in the breaking of the bread.

And today, how many of us are gathered? Not quite 153 but heading that way. And we are all different – ages, life experiences, temperaments. And Lorna and I are here not so much as pastors, shepherds, but as fishers, a fisherman and a fisherwoman, and we have gathered you together, given authority by virtue of our ordinations when someone laid hands on us and handed on apostolic authority just as someone years ago laid hands on them and then a whole chain of handing on going back to the apostles and beyond the apostles to Jesus himself – who also, in his physical absence, gives us authority to break bread in his name. And around the world we are gathered, from every tribe and nation, in every tongue and culture, a great catch of fish of every kind, like the fish of the great sea.

What a glorious vision – and how many fish in the net today; how many Christians gathered in worship, breaking bread with Jesus? Difficult to find or calculate a figure but I shouldn't think it would be too far wrong to say 153 million. That's a mighty big haul, isn't it? And yet so much more fishing to do.