

St Luke in the city
John 21.1-19

05.05.2019

Just a couple of years ago before we came back from Taranaki, Gay suggested that we look at buying a bach somewhere between New Plymouth where we have a granddaughter who is just coming up to 2, and Napier where we have four two boys who are 6, a girl who is seven and one who is 16. Great idea I said and I know just the place..., .Turangi!

You see I love fly fishing. And where better than close to the mighty Tongariro Taupo which is reckoned to have the best trout fishing spots in the world. There is a lot to learn, and I am the eternal novice. I have all the gear, a first rate rod, waders and a fine selection of flies. In fact the tackle shop in Turangi smile in anticipation when they see me coming in. I even have a couple of mates who are seriously good fishers who have taken me under their wing to give me lessons.

“Trout live in the most beautiful places in the world.” And I can spend hours trying my luck up to my chest in the water [with waders on of course] casting away in some of the most glorious scenery in New Zealand. On such balmy days, I often reflect that to actually catch a trout would be a bonus.

Which is just as well, because the thing that most impresses me about fly fishing, an aspect of the sport that stays with you no matter how long you practice it, is failure. You go out at first morning light, hauling all of your gear, full of hope and expectation. You use good form in casting and presenting the fly. You work from a well-stocked box of flies. And yet, as the sun goes down that evening, you have very little to show for it. Actually for me, more often than not, nothing to show for it.

If you are going to good at trout fishing, you had better get good at failure!

Funny, I heard very much the same statement from my Bishop at my ordination retreat some 46 years ago. Our Bishop, addressing us young priests to be [for most of us were young in those days] said, “I can assure you, if you have any vision for the church, if you have high expectations for yourself and your ministry, then you had better get good at handling failure.”

Now that's a rather odd message to hear, as we walk through the Great 50 Days of Joy that the church calls Eastertide. We are presented, in the days just after Easter, with a gospel lesson that is so full of failure. Easter is the joyful victory of God, not the sad defeat. And yet defeat permeates this Sunday's gospel.

Gospel means good news and yet our story is full of the bad news of failure. With this Sunday's gospel lesson we come to the very end of the Gospel of John. Failure permeates every aspect of this story. First of all, there is the apparent or assumed failure of Jesus and his mission. The walk with Jesus has ended terribly. The disciples have trudged back to what they were doing before Jesus called them to be his disciples. They are fishing, doing the familiar stuff before all the excitement of Jesus grabbed them.

Maybe they didn't know what to do with themselves. After standing by and watching Jesus humiliatingly crucified on Friday, it's over. Back on the road, as the Jesus movement gained momentum, they had hopes that he was indeed, the anointed one, the Messiah who would redeem Israel. But Jesus had failed. You can't fight the powers that be. The people turned against us. The Romans and the chief priests had all of the cards. There's nothing left for us to, but to go back to fishing demoralised, confused, maybe even angry.

And remember, John has just given us dramatic accounts of the risen Christ appearing to the disciples when they were behind locked doors (John 20). He has spoken to them, appeared to them.

And their collective response? They have gone back to fishing! You must be a really dull person to walk away from a resurrection, to have been personally met by the risen Christ, and still go back to fishing! But honestly now, as we sit here a few Sundays after our grand celebration of the resurrection, are we much different from the disciples?

And yet their fishing did not go much better for them than their discipleship. A group of disciples have been fishing all night, and they haven't caught a thing. Their empty nets must have seemed to them like a symbol for just how they felt. Empty. Failures. Defeated. Peter, the lead disciple, is among the group. Peter personally embodied their collective failure. Back in the upper room at the last supper, Peter had promised to remain steadfast and to stand with Jesus, even when the going got rough. Well, you know how long that lasted. Peter ended

up denying Jesus three times and breaking down in tears at the failure of his resolve.

Note though, that when Peter denied Jesus, in the courtyard in the middle of the night, when the maid had questioned him, Peter was not so much denying Jesus as denying that he was a disciple. And to be sure, with his repeated denials, he certainly doesn't act much like a disciple.

But now, here at the end, Jesus comes to Peter, seeks him out and recalls him.

Even as Peter denied Jesus three times, Jesus calls him three times, calls him to love him and then commissions him, giving him the assignment of feeding his beloved sheep. In spite of Peter's past failure, Jesus puts Peter in charge of his flock, asking him to attend, feed, and keep the sheep of Jesus pasture.

Peter denied Jesus three times back in that dark twilight of that dark Friday. Now, three times Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love me?" And three times Peter answers in the affirmative. Yes! Yes! Yes I love you!

I don't think Jesus is so much quizzing Peter as repeating his question in order to reassure him. When he asks, "Do you love me?" Jesus seems confident that the answer is "Yes!" Though Peter has disappointed himself and his Lord and failed at being the perfect disciple, nevertheless his love for Jesus is sure. Just because you dearly love Jesus, that doesn't mean that you will never disappoint yourself or Jesus. Yet the important thing is that Jesus returns to Peter, engages him, and commissions him.

Our gospel lesson concludes with a prediction of Peter's death. One day Peter, the one who had once denied his Lord, and then the one who was forgiven and re-called to be a disciple by his Lord, would eventually die for his Lord. Peter, the failure, the one who was charged by Jesus with tending the sheep who were failures, would succeed as a martyr, that is, as a witness to Christ. Peter would prove, in the end, completely steadfast and faithful to Jesus' invitation, "Follow me!"

Eastertide with Jesus, the days after the resurrection, is not simply moving with Jesus into eternity, and not primarily taking Jesus taking us into eternity. Easter concludes with these words ringing in our years, "Follow me."

I think there's a lesson here for us in this account of Jesus breakfasting with the disciples on the beach. Sorry, if you thought Easter and the risen Christ meant that Jesus has thereby erased all discouragement, frustration and failure from the world and from our lives. Still, even after Easter, even after the resurrected Christ comes and stands right in front of us, it's still possible to misunderstand, to fall away, to allow the everydayness of life, the dull, reassuring routine, to overcome our joy at the miracle of Easter.

And yet the good news is that Jesus does not let us be. He comes to us where we are, seeks us out amid the dull, numbing routine of everyday life. There he speaks to us, reassures us and once again calls to us, "Follow me."

Jesus will not let us walk away from him or his resurrection, shrug our shoulders and go back to our everyday routine. He comes to us. The risen Christ appears. He not only appears to us, but he also calls to us. He assigns us his work to do. "Feed my sheep" could be interpreted in a number of ways. I think that's how Christ's vocation is. What he expects you to do varies with each of us but each of us is here under his invitation, his command, "Follow me!"

I hope that in your times of failure, when you aren't the follower of Jesus you intend to be, when believing in Jesus is difficult for you, or when you are disappointed by the results of your labours, or facing some failure in your own ministry, that you will remember this story, this post-Easter story and take heart.

Our failure does not negate his vocation. Even in our failures to follow, he keeps showing up to us in our ordinary lives, he keeps encouraging us, and keeps saying to us, even us, "Follow me!"