

Third Sunday of Easter--April 18, 2010

Thoughts on John 21:1-19

At the time John's Gospel was written, the Christian community had more than six decades to reflect on, test, question and reinterpret the Jesus story. The last of the canonical Gospels was not intended as an evangelistic piece for those outside the church, but a catechism to help the church understand its current circumstance and struggle. The Johannine community had perceived itself as a sect within the big tent of Judaism, but after the destruction of the temple in 70CE, tensions increased as Judaism had to define itself anew. The Jewish followers of Jesus and the growing Gentile follower of Jesus no longer fit the tighter Pharisaic understanding of Judaism. In the years that followed, this new definition began to force out the followers of Jesus. Whether a formal ban from synagogue worship occurred or not, the result found this fledgling community of Jesus followers facing two significant issues. First, how would they understand themselves apart from the Jewish tradition. And second, how would Rome designate them if they were no longer under the safety of Judaism. To this point, most followers of Jesus found exemption from participating in the Imperial Cult because Jews were given that exemption. Without this exemption, the followers of Jesus would be forced to participate in the cult rituals or face harsh punishment.

John 21, an epilogue of sorts, begins with a curious geographic reference. The setting is the Sea of Tiberias, or as it is better known, the Sea of Galilee. The author uses this description back in the 6th chapter as the setting for the feeding of the multitude, but no where else does it appear in scripture. Was this simply the way the Johannine community referred to the Sea of Galilee, or was the author attempting to place the story not only geographically, but politically? The name, Sea of Tiberias, came from the city of Tiberias which was founded during the time of Jesus. It was constructed on an area deemed holy by the Jewish people, and it was for many years viewed as a symbol of Rome's unjust power.

The author places this resurrection account squarely in this very real and relevant setting. This was welcome news for a community that no longer found itself in the somewhat secure setting of the synagogue. In these resurrection accounts, the living Christ demonstrated abundance where others had only seen scarcity. This points the reader back to the Wedding Feast at Cana (2:1-11). He breaks bread in gracious fashion which mirrors the feeding of the 5000 (6:1-14). He requested food from the disciples only to provide food himself. This echoes the conversation Jesus had with the woman at the well (4:4-27). He asked Peter three questions on discipleship that hinted toward reconciliation and healing for the three denials (13:38, 18:17, 18:25-27). This passage is more than a story to awe an audience with miraculous happenings. It becomes for this community an affirmation that what Jesus did in his earthly ministry is what the resurrected Christ continues to do in and through the church.

These words place a challenge at the doorstep of our local congregations.

Whether we recognize it or not, we find ourselves in the very real world of brokenness, injustice and suffering. We can try to return to life as usual, but the living Christ will come and meet us beside our own Sea of Tiberias, where the political and economic powers continue to place the interest of the system above the well-being of the people who make the system work. There will be risk if we are to step outside the security of 'church as usual' where an exemption from anything resembling social action has traditionally been given. My own congregation took an initial step as it recently hosted the CIW's Modern Day Slavery Museum, but such actions remain baby steps in the face of systemic evil. We need to venture further outside of 'church as usual,' and question the foundational issues that make modern day slavery and other economic abuses acceptable. More local congregations need to join the Campaign for Fair Food which has seen seven landmark agreements. This sounds very simple, yet many Christian communities choose the exemption of security. They like to remember Jesus as he was, not as One who is alive and: 1. Demonstrating a spirit of abundance; 2. Embodying the sacrificial ideal of the Eucharist; 3. Reflecting the language of love in tangible acts of compassion. It is only when the church walks alongside the marginalized and abused that it will discover that the Jesus it reads about in worship is the same One who invites all of us to embody the message of resurrection along our own Sea of Tiberias (the Tomato fields of Florida) where injustice is manifesting itself.

Now some 30 years after the death of Archbishop Romero, his words remain relevant and true for us. He said, "The Church can be the Church only as long as it goes on being the Body of Christ. Its mission will be authentic only so long as it is the mission of Jesus in the new situations, the new circumstances of history. The criterion that will guide the church will be neither the approval of, nor the fear of, men and women, no matter how powerful or threatening they may be. It is the church's duty in history to lend its voice to Christ so that he may speak, its feet so that he may walk today's world, its hands to build the reign of God..."