



Father Ambrose Bennett

Homily for the Third Sunday of Paschaltide, 2010, Year C

Today's gospel tells us of the last recorded appearance of the Risen Christ to seven of his disciples on beach of the Sea of Tiberias in Galilee. It is a surprising episode: already Jesus has risen and has shown himself to Mary Magdalen and to Peter and John; and yet, they are not yet able to take it all in. Remember that early in his public ministry, Jesus had walked along the Sea of Galilee and had seen the two brothers, Simon Peter and Andrew, casting their nets; and Jesus told them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men" (Mt 4.19). And they immediately left their nets and followed Jesus. But now Simon Peter has gone back to his old job as a fisherman, and the others go with him. It sounds as if the apostles had decided that, at least for the present, they would go back to being simply fishers of fish. No doubt, they needed to make a living, and they needed time to understand what God intended for them.

And so they went out into the night to fish and came up empty. There could be no going back now to the life they had before; something had changed radically with the Lord's Resurrection, yet they do not immediately recognize the Risen Lord when he addresses them. Jesus stands on the beach and calls out to them, "Children, have you caught anything to eat?" They answered him, "No." Then this mysterious person tells them to cast their nets on the right side of the boat, and soon they have such a huge catch of 153 fish that they are not able to haul it all into their boat. At that point, John the Beloved Disciple recognizes who has spoken to them, and says, "It is the Lord!" (Jn 21.7). St. John Chrysostom says that

When they recognized him, the disciples Peter and John again exhibited their different temperaments. The one was more fervent, the other more contemplative. The one was ready to go, the other more penetrating. John is the one who first recognized Jesus, but Peter is the first to come to him (St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of John* 87.2).

In this scene from the gospel, we see the connection between contemplation and love: contemplation is the first to see the Savior, and love attains to him.

Modern readers of the gospel are puzzled at this number: why would John include the detail that there were precisely 153 fish? Does it matter in some way? Yes, it does matter. According to ancient zoology, there were 153 kinds of fishes in the world. This particular catch was the perfect catch of fish, having a specimen of every kind of fish: a symbolic representation of the rich variety of God's creation, and so especially of the human race, gathered into his Kingdom.

Remember that Jesus had likened the Kingdom of God to "a net which was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind; when it was full, men drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good into vessels but threw away the bad. So it will be at the close of



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the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous, and throw them into the furnace of fire; there men will weep and gnash their teeth” (Mt 13.47-50).

So the fish represent those who will believe in Christ, drawn from all the nations. It is Peter and his fellow apostles who will draw them in, once the Risen Lord clothes them with power from on high at Pentecost. Notice that St. John tells us that the net was not torn, and that there was only a single fishing boat. In the similar incident recounted by St. Luke before Our Lord’s Resurrection, there is more than one boat, and the nets break. Everything is different now: the barque of Peter is one, and his net is one, and it does not break, for the Risen Lord has made it so. So also is Christ’s Church one and holy, catholic and apostolic, and her unity remains intact.

Consider also for a moment that it is Peter who jumps into the water when he recognizes the Lord at last. Once before, Peter had walked upon the water, till his faith failed him, and he began to sink (Mt 14.28-32). It is a different situation now: he makes his way through the water himself, having stripped himself of every encumbrance, sustained by his faith in Christ. When he arrives at the shore, Christ already has a charcoal fire started, with bread and fish upon it, even before any of the miraculous catch has been unloaded. The Lord has already prepared the feast, even before Peter and the other apostles can bring their offerings. In the gesture of taking the bread, they disciples knew the Lord who had called them, who had suffered on the Cross, and was now risen in glory, yet veiled from their sight.

So it still is in the Church, the Barque of Peter. We still recognize the Risen Lord in the Eucharist, the Breaking of the Bread that is Christ’s own flesh. We, like Peter’s boat, are tossed by storms, and yet the boat does not capsize. The fine fabric of the Church’s unity seems about to break, and yet the net of Peter holds. The sacraments remain holy, not through the holiness of the Church’s priests but through the holiness of Christ himself, our Great High Priest in heaven. He calls upon us to work out our salvation in fear and trembling, to bring forth the fruits of charity, and to offer them at his altar. And yet, the holiness of the Lord’s Altar does not depend our own holiness: remember that even before the apostles added their catch of fish, the Lord had prepared the bread and fish himself. In the end, it is the Risen Christ upon whom we depend, and on him alone.

In today’s gospel, our Savior asks Peter the pointed question three times, “Do you love me?” And Peter answered Yes three times, grieved that the Lord had repeated his question yet again. In response, each time, the Lord commands Peter to feed the Lord’s sheep, and then tells him simply, “Follow me” (Jn 21.19). Peter’s threefold confession of love for Christ is a threefold reparation for his earlier denial of Christ in the hour of crisis. St. Peter was very much a penitent, and yet it was he whom Christ chose as the one to confirm the brethren and to feed the Lord’s flock. G. K. Chesterton put it this way:

When Christ at a symbolic moment was establishing His great society, He chose for its cornerstone... a man, Peter. And upon this rock He has built His Church,



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and the gates of Hell have not prevailed against it. All the empires and the kingdoms have failed, because of this inherent and continual weakness, that they were founded by strong men and upon strong men. But this one thing, the historic Christian Church, was founded on a weak man, and for that reason it is indestructible. For no chain is stronger than its weakest link (G.K. Chesterton, *Heretics*, ch. 8).

And still the office of St. Peter continues to be exercised through the Pope, the Successor of Peter and the Vicar of Christ, who is under such unjust attack in our time from the Church's enemies and from heretics and dissenters within the Church. Still today, some claim that the unworthiness or ineptitude of the Church's ministers or the sins of believers should render us silent or in some way discredit the faith itself. Now the attacks against the Pope are slander, libel, a tissue of lies, and hate-filled propaganda. But *even if these things were true*, our faith would not be shaken. For the act of faith is in God himself—in the Father, in the Son, and in the Holy Spirit. The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches:

Salvation comes from God alone; but because we receive the life of faith through the Church, she is our mother: "We believe the Church as the teacher of our new birth, and not *in* the Church as if she were the author of our salvation." Because she is our mother, she is also our teacher in the faith (CCC 169).

To believe that the Church is "holy" and "catholic," and that she is "one" and "apostolic" (as the Nicene Creed adds), is inseparable from belief in one God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In the Apostles' Creed we profess "one Holy Church" (*Credo... Ecclesiam*), and not to believe *in* the Church, so as not to confuse God with his works and to attribute clearly to God's goodness *all* the gifts he has bestowed on his Church (CCC 750).

The holiness of the sacraments does not depend on human righteousness, either: **the sacraments are actions of Christ himself and so are not tainted by the sins of those who administer them or receive them.**

Sins and scandals don't shake our faith because faith is not in the Church but *in God alone*, in whom the Church herself believes: "Look not on our sins but on the faith of your Church," we pray in every Mass. This is not merely my personal opinion—this is Catholic dogma, spelled out in the Catechism.

Still today, the powers that be are distressed and angry that we have filled the world with the Name of Jesus and wish that we would remain silent. But St. Peter, aware as he was of his own failure in the moment of crisis, did not let that discourage him from proclaiming the truth that there is salvation in Christ alone and that there is no other name under heaven, other than the Holy Name of Jesus, by which we must be saved (Acts 4.12). And more than that: to be saved, one must remain in the Barque of Peter—that is, in Catholic and apostolic unity.



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In the end, this truth alone matters, and it will endure.