



RETREAT

Tuesday, October 1, 2024

Fr. Timothy Radcliffe OP Resurrection Fishing

John 21. 1 – 14

‘That night they caught nothing.’ Every one of these resurrection appearances begins in the dark. For Mary Magdalene, it was the dark of her ignorance that the Lord had risen. But he is there waiting for her. For the disciples in the locked room, it was the darkness of their fear. Christ rose from on Easter Sunday conquering the night, and yet time and again we find ourselves back in the dark. The darkness of war, the crisis of sexual abuse and so on.

What is the night which envelopes these disciples who have gone fishing? We are back in the ordinary world. Peter says, ‘I am going fishing’. They are back to the old routine. It is almost as if nothing had happened in Jerusalem. Their nets are empty. They are empty. The stranger asks if they have even a tiny bit to eat. They all answer together No. In Greek *Ou*. The word is as empty as they are. *Ou!* The fishers of human beings can’t even catch the smallest fish.

We have all known those moments when we seem to achieve nothing. The initial enthusiasm has faded. As we start his second Assembly, I bet some of us feel that. Those who had begun with enthusiasm and excitement might be wondering whether we are going anywhere. Some of us never believed we were anyway. *Ou!* The most common question I have received about the Synod these last eleven months has been sceptical: Has anything been achieved? Isn’t all a waste of time and money?

But the stranger is there on the beach even before they spot him. God is always there first, before we notice. In the Prologue of the Rule of St Benedict God says, ‘My eyes are upon you and My ears open to your prayers. And before you call, I will say, ‘Behold, I am here.’ ”¹ God is waiting, even before we pray.

Why don’t they recognise him? You might think this is one of those obscure questions about which scholars like to write incomprehensible articles, but it is profoundly relevant to us in this Synod. How are we to recognise the Lord who is with us today but whom we may not have seen?

It is not that he *looks* different. No, it is because they had never *really* seen him before. Herbert McCabe OP puts it well: ‘People are not just recognizing Jesus as the man they knew was killed. They are recognizing him as the man they *sort* of knew and *thought* they knew, but

¹ The Prologue of The Rule of St Benedict, Translated into English. A Pax Book, preface by W.K. Lowther Clarke. London: S.P.C.K., 1931



didn't *really* know until now.'² He *is* the mystery of Love Incarnate and they are only now beginning to glimpse the height and depth of love which surpasses all understanding. It is the beloved disciple who says, 'It is the Lord' because he has loving eyes. Early theologians often asked why Jesus did not appear to his enemies, like Pontius Pilate. He could have jumped up and down in front of Pilate and still Pilate could not have seen him.

Love 'is a growing word, one whose meaning changes and develops.'³ As children we think that our mother's love consists in providing us food when we demand it and never leaving us alone. As we grow up, we come to understand that sometimes love demands being absent or refusing to give you what you want, such as an iPhone.

In 2012 a French Dominican called Jean-Joseph Lataste was beatified. Or as the BBC put it, 'beautified'! His life was turned upside down when in 1864 he visited a prison for women. Most of them had been prostitutes, or who had committed infanticide. He looked at them and said: "my sisters." He founded a congregation of sisters in which they could live along with other women. Many pious bourgeois people were disgusted. They had not yet learnt to *see* love in action. They did not recognise the stranger on the beach.

Biblical scholars spend hours in silence in libraries studying obscure dead languages. This looks for some to be a waste of time but it too is an act of love. We do not gather in synod so as to negotiate compromises or bash opponents. We are here to learn from each other what is the meaning of this odd word 'love.' Everyone of us is a beloved disciple who has a particular gift for seeing the stranger on the beach and saying: 'It is the Lord.'

The turning point is when they obey the voice of the Lord and cast the net on the other side. It seems pointless. They are the ones who know about fishing. Why obey this man who knows nothing about fishing? We have come to this Synod in obedience. For many it seems pointless. We have laboured days and nights and perhaps doubt that anything will be achieved. But the Church says come, and we have come. We have cast the net on the other side of the boat even when some of us think that there will be no catch. But this obedience may be fruitful in ways that we do not imagine.

Here we come to the great puzzle: 153 fat fish. I could bore you for hours with all the marvellous and often absurd explanations of this number. Why 153? Some say there must have been 153 of them. But imagine counting them leaping all over the place. Others refer to the 153 churches that may have existed at the time. Others of 153 nations that were then known. It clearly means abundance. God's abundant providence is at work. St John Henry Newman described providence as 'God's noiseless work.' The *Instrumentum Laboris* opens with a quotation from Isaiah: 'On this mountain, the Lord of the universe will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear' (25.6)

The kingdom bursts into our lives with conviviality, excess, like all of that wine at Cana. St Dominic came back to the monastery of nuns in Rome late at night after a preaching mission. He woke up the nuns so that he could tell them about his preaching. He asked for wine. There

² *God, Christ and Us* p.94

³ Herbert McCabe OP, *Law, Love and Language*, p.18



was only a little left. The nuns brought a cup which he passed around saying to the sisters, drink up, *Bibite satis*, drink enough. And the cup never ran out.

We must dare to trust that the Divine providence will bless this synod abundantly, ‘a good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap.’ (Luke 6.38). We are not here for a meagre meal but for *the haute cuisine* of the Kingdom, if we desire it enough.

Peter is transformed instantly. At the beginning of this scene, he is empty. He has fallen back into his old life. It is as if nothing has happened. Now he stands up and puts on his clothes before jumping into the sea. We usually take our clothes off when we go swimming, but this is a sign of his dignity restored, just as the father clothes his prodigal son when he comes home. Despite his shame of the Lord, he swims towards his friend. I would have been so ashamed that I would have swum in the opposite direction. The other disciples struggle to haul ashore the catch. Peter does so single handed. What is Peter’s secret? Whatever he has done, he returns to the Lord time and again. His love is stronger than his shame.

Jesus said; ‘When I lifted up, I shall draw all to myself.’ (12.32). Now we see Peter drawing – it is the same word in Greek – the net full of fat fish to himself and the net is not broken. This is not due to his strength but his cooperation with the attraction of the Lord, the magnetic pull of the Risen Lord. It is the Lord’s attractiveness which pulls the unbroken net ashore. The Petrine ministry of unity is not policing God’s wayward children. It is revealing the attractiveness of the Lord, who draws us together.

When I came to the Synod last year, I thought the great challenge was to overcome the poisonous opposition between traditionalists and progressives. How can we heal that polarisation that is so alien to Catholicism? But as I listened, there seemed to be an even more fundamental challenge: How can the Church embrace all of the diverse cultures of our world? How can we haul in the net with its fish from every culture of the world? How can the net not be broken?

When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, the Cold War was deemed to be over. Francis Fukuyama published *The End of History and the Last Man*⁴ arguing that we had entered a new era, the triumph of Western liberal democracy. Every nation seemed destined to ‘evolve’ into our Western way of life. Some countries, especially in the global South, just had to catch up. This was an illusion from which the West is slowly waking up. Instead we live in a multipolar world in which many from the Global South see the West as decadent and doomed. We live in a post-Western world⁵. Many Westerners do not yet realise this.

We await a new Pentecost in which each culture speaks in its own native tongue and is understood. This is also our task during the Synod and the foundation of our mission to our torn and divided world. We ask for the prayers of Mary, untier of knots, and Peter, the mender of nets!

⁴ Penguin, London.

⁵ Oliver Stuenkel, *Post-Western World: How Emerging Powers Are Remaking Global Order*, Polity, 2016



First of all, let us recognise that we need each other if we are to be Catholic. The diverse cultures gathered in this Assembly offer healing to each other, challenge each other's prejudices and summon each other to a deeper understanding of love. Every culture has a way of seeing the Stranger on the beach and saying 'It is the Lord.'

For example, Pope Benedict confessed that the West is suffering from 'a form of sickness of the spirit'⁶, from what St John Paul II called 'a culture of death.' Either we flee from death and pretend it will never happen or we seek to master it with assisted dying. Like Peter, we Westerners need help to see the Risen Lord on the shore who has triumphed over death. We need help to live with our mortality in hope.

A beloved French Dominican died during a General Chapter in Bogota. At his funeral, the brethren from the West were overcome with grief. A young Colombian brother protested: 'This is not the time of death. This is the time of faith'⁷. Our brother in this Synod, Father Orobator SJ, gave thanks that he was raised by parents who practised traditional African religion, with its profound sense of the gift of life. He wrote, 'central to the whole religious system throughout Africa is a *deep belief in the livingness of creation*'.⁸ You do not know what it means to live if you hide from death. We have much to learn from our brothers and sisters in other parts of the globe, whose eyes are open to death and so understand more of what it means to be alive.

Perhaps our greatest challenge is to embrace what Pope Benedict called 'interculturality.' This is not the time for a theoretical exploration of what this means. Instead let us imagine a net. A net consists of empty holes linked together by ropes. Spaces and bonds. Without both, there would be no net to haul in the fish.

When cultures meet, there should remain a space between them. Neither should devour the other, as is happening with the globalisation of consumerism. We should reverence cultural difference. Remember that marvellous German word, *zwischenraum*, 'the room between'. This is the fertile space between cultures when each retains its identity but is open to the other. Aquinas said that when there is love, the two become one, but remain distinct⁹.

No single culture could ever binds us together: Not Latin; not even Thomism! The net is untorn because every culture is open in its own way to the truth. Cardinal Ratzinger explained in a talk given in Hong Kong in 1992, that 'the fundamental openness of each person to the other can only be explained by the hidden fact that our souls have been touched by truth; and this explains the essential agreement which exists even between cultures most removed from each other.... No one grasps the whole; the myriad insights form and build a kind of mosaic displaying their complementarity and interrelatedness. In order to be whole, everybody needs each other. Human beings approach the unity and wholeness of our being only in the reciprocity of all great cultural achievements'¹⁰.

⁶ Homily at the opening of the Second Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod Bishops, October 4th, 2009

⁷ I was reminded of this incident by frere Bruno Cadoret OP, later Master of the Order.

⁸ Agbonkhianmeghe E. *Religion and Faith in Africa: Confessions of an animist*, Orbis, New York, 2018, p.16

⁹ ST II II 17.3

¹⁰ 'Christ, Faith and the Challenge of Cultures', Meeting with the Doctrinal Commissions in Asia. Hong Kong, 3 March 1993



We are bound together by our shared faith, the Creed, which transcends any culture. But how can one translate *homooousios* into Swahili, Hindi or Japanese? Surely the net needs to be held together by mutual delight, friendship, shared joy and even laughter. One of the most fascinating examples of this interculturality was the Jesuit mission to China in the sixteenth century. This encounter of West and East flourished through a friendship that was mutually enriching. In fact Matteo Ricci's first book was on friendship. Friendship knit the net.

But rather than talk about these admirable Jesuits, I shall glance at two examples I have experienced in my Order, just to help us imagine our task in the Synod. One of my favourite places is a farm in Benin, founded by our brother Godfrey Nzamujo. It is called Songhai, after the great African Empire that flourished in the region five hundred years ago. Nzamjo learnt to farm at home in Africa and also studied Western science in California. Songhai is the fruit of African and Western farming. The farm began as one hectare of waste land that no one wanted, and now covers 24 hectares and educates young farmers from all over Africa, indeed the world.

Nothing is wasted here. Flies fatten on the left overs of the restaurant and then are fed to the fish. Nzamujo calls Songhai the Sheraton Hotel for flies. All the animals and plants thrive in mutual dependence. At Songahi even the mosquitoes have their role to play in the balance of life, even though they are not one of God's best ideas!

The Eucharistic here is seen within an ecology of gratitude, Nzamujo said, 'The Mass is the combination of the gifts of the sun, the water and the soil. The wine is the pain and anguish coming from the grapes that have to be crushed, but it becomes a symbol of friendship.' Songhai radiates hope. He said, 'There is a time to be born and a time to die, because that is nature. Africa may seem to be on the losing side, but honestly, from what I feel, from what I see, tomorrow is African time.'

This what happens when cultures meet in friendship and beget hope. The space between us is bridged by mutual delight and even laughter. Nzamujo maintains that his pigs symbolised both the project and our friendship, since they are the result of interbreeding between big white Yorkshire pigs like me and small black African pigs like him. Difference is fertile.

Another brief example: A Japanese Dominican, Shigeto Oshida described himself as a Buddhist who met Jesus. He founded an ashram near Mt Fuji where Christians and Buddhists lived together in harmony. He detested the tendency of the West to eviscerate reality with abstract notions. He called this the 'third leg of the chicken' which was neither the right leg nor the leg, but an abstract non-existent leg. He said, 'We Japanese know in our blood what religion is. The Catholic Church is not a box of chocolates or a business.'¹¹

When Oshida gave retreats, especially for bishops used to the sedentary life, he enjoyed sending them to plant rice in the paddy fields, impervious to their protests about back aches. He wrote 'A farmer who works hard from dawn to dusk knows that a grain of rice is not his product, a thing made by his own effort, but something given to him by God. He must offer the grain of rice to God who is hidden but who gives everything. He must say "This is yours"'¹²

¹¹ P.135

¹² Compiled by Claudia Mattiello, *Takemori Sōan: Teachings of Shigeto Oshida, a Zen Master*, Buenos Aires, 2007



Oshida was deeply critical of Western culture, but, like Nzamujo, he reached across cultural divisions with laughter and delight. He liked to joke that God tricked him into becoming a Christian and then a Dominican because he met wonderful Christians and then Dominicans and thought that we all like that. He would laugh saying ‘I was wrong! God cheated me.’

So Peter’s net is filled with space and held together by truth, delight and joy. It is hauled to the beach not by juridical power, but by the attractiveness of the Lord who, when he is lifted up, draws all to himself. Beauty hauls the net to the shore. Think of Matatoshi Asari, a Japanese Catholic from Nagasaki, who sent cherry trees, symbols of reconciliation, to all the nations that had been harmed by the Second World War.¹³

May God bless this synod with such loving cultural encounters, in which the two become one but remain distinct. No culture can dominate. But we need to be acutely aware of how power imbalance is at play in our conversations. The encounter of cultures is never innocent or merely cerebral. Colonialism still structures our world. Robator shared an African proverb: ‘Until the lion learns to write and speak, the hunt will always glorify the hunter.’¹⁴ The lion does now speak but the West does not listen.

According to a song from my youth, ‘Money makes the world go round.’ We may live in a post Western world, but the banking system is still controlled by the West. Imperialism is not over, and still seeks to impose its values on others. But the stranger on the beach was not a member of the wealthy elite. He was crucified by the greatest Imperial power of his day, a death reserved for slaves, intended to humiliate. So let us listen with acute attention to those who are crucified today by the imperial powers of our time. Let us listen with humility to each other. It is a humble Simon Peter whom we shall meet this afternoon.

¹³ Naoko Abe, *The Martyr an the Red Kimono*, Chatto and Windus, London, 2024.

¹⁴ P. xviii