

‘They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their presence.’

Have you noticed how often fish turn up in the gospel stories?

Jesus was a carpenter from the village of Nazareth, but he chose to base much of his ministry around the Sea of Galilee, then as now a source of fish. He recruited his inner circle from the fishing villages around the Sea; not surprisingly, at least seven of them were fishermen. And he promised to turn them into fishers of people. He used their small fishing boats to get around the area and as a makeshift pulpit for his preaching. He watched them at work and helped them to make a miraculous catch; he told a parable about a fishing net. And when he presided at the great feast of five thousand, the food he blessed and provided consisted of bread and fish.

In the post-resurrection appearances food features three times; twice that food is fish. For early Christians facing persecution the Greek word for fish, *Ichthus*, provided an acrostic of the words ‘Jesus Christ, son of God, saviour’ and thus a secret symbol of the faith. And in early Christian art, depictions of the heavenly banquet show bread and fish, not meat, which was associated with Roman greed and Jewish sacrifice¹.

So what is going on in our gospel story today, in which Jesus eats a piece of broiled fish?

First of all this story is a demonstration by Jesus that he is real. The disciples think that they are seeing his ghost, and why wouldn’t they? Even though two of their number have just returned from Emmaus to tell their friends about their encounter with the risen Christ; even though Simon has told them that he has seen Jesus. It is one thing hearing such an extraordinary story from others but entirely different when it happens to you. And they are frightened.

So Jesus offers them the same proof that we heard him offer in our reading last week from John’s gospel: ‘Look at my hands and my feet... Touch me and see.’ Luke then tells us that they ‘still did not believe it’, but now their terror has turned to ‘joy and amazement’. We’ve all had this experience when confronted with an amazing sight or some wonderful news: we put our hands to our face, laugh, open our eyes wide and say, ‘I can’t believe it!’ But we do believe it, we are just saying that we need a few moments to let it sink in. And then we offer our congratulations, hug everyone in sight (Covid restrictions permitting, of course) and dance around the room. And I suspect that is what happened in this case as well.

Which means that, when Jesus asks them for something to eat, he is moving well beyond a physical demonstration of his realness. He’s done that and they know it, they just need time, as we would say, to process it. Here’s what else I think might be going on.

¹ [https://www.academia.edu/1609783/Eucharistic Eating and why many early Christians preferred fish](https://www.academia.edu/1609783/Eucharistic_Eating_and_why_many_early_Christians_preferred_fish)

First, Jesus is reminding his friends to offer hospitality, just as he did when he washed their feet in the upper room. When a stranger visits, when a guest comes among you, you don't huddle in a corner, you invite them in.

We can offer hospitality to Jesus on a personal level, inviting him into our hearts to direct our lives. We can also offer hospitality as a community, receiving newcomers to church with openness, welcoming everyone to our building, our church yard and our events. We can take our hospitality out to where other people are, for example through support for the DENS foodbank and through giving to our regular charities such as Mercy Ships and Christian Aid.

Jesus was born into a tradition of absolute, compulsory hospitality. It's what he lived. It's what he taught. And it is what we are called to do and to be.

Secondly Jesus is reminding them of his humanity. Luke was Greek, writing for a Greek audience. The popular religions of the Greek world were the mystery cults, where gods and goddesses—for the most part, goddesses—were worshipped from a distance as fearsome, often capricious, other-worldly deities. Jesus brought a different understanding of God. He is Emmanuel, God with us. He was God as one of us, God in human flesh.

In the glory and grandeur of our Easter celebrations, we forget the reminder of Christmas: that Jesus was God in human flesh. That is the mystery, the wonder, the miracle of the one we call Jesus the Christ.

Thirdly, Jesus is embracing his disciples, drawing them into community with him. He accepts a gift of cooked fish, and at once they are all symbolically transported back to those early days in Galilee when they would have shared such a meal many times. It's a reminder of their shared experience and at the same time a look into the future, a signal that they still have work to do, as fishers of people. And, even though it is a meal of fish rather than bread and wine it is surely a sacramental meal, in the words of one of our post communion prayers, 'a forestaste of the heavenly banquet prepared for all peoples'. Just as Jesus fed the five thousand with bread and fish, so he shares a meal of fish with his followers. And so we will dine with him here, today, and be prepared to be sent out 'in the power of his spirit, to live and work to his praise and glory'.