

Ps 67:1,3
Ps 25:3
Ps 31:14,15
Ps 62:4,7
Ps 27:5,6; Hy 31:5
John 21:1-14
Deuteronomy 28:1-14
John 21:1

Yarrow, July 4, 2010

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Whether we're at home or on holidays, whether happy or suffering, we want the Lord God to be with us. We know it's His promise to be with us, we know too that we need Him. But the problem as we experience it is that we don't see Him. And if we can't see Him, if we can't touch Him, we conclude that maybe, just maybe, He's not with us after all.... And that's a discouraging thought.

The apostle John wrote a gospel about the words and works of Jesus Christ. After relating how the resurrected Lord showed Himself to the ten disciples in Jerusalem and showed Himself a week later to doubting Thomas also, he rounded off what he wished to say about Jesus. Said John in conclusion:

“...Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His Name” (20:30f).

From that we conclude that, as far as John was concerned, He had written enough for the church of the New Testament to know who Jesus was and so be saved.

Yet, brothers and sisters, after John has finished his gospel, it is as if another thought came to the mind of the apostle, another important item that had to be included in his gospel. So he writes a post-script, an epilogue, one more chapter that must –he thinks– be brought to the attention of the churches. That's the matter of the fishing incident by the Sea of Tiberias. Why that matter had to be included in his gospel, why it had to be told to the Christians of the New Testament? That, brothers and sisters, was because John –and behind Him moved the Holy Spirit– did not wish the New Testament church, ourselves included, to think that Jesus might in fact be absent from us. Through the revelation of Jesus at the Sea of Tiberias, John would impress upon the church that Jesus is never really absent; He is instead always present with His divinity, majesty, grace and Spirit. For: there is far more to reality than meets the eye.

I summarise the message of our text with this theme:

THE ABSENT CHRIST IS PRESENT WITH US ALWAYS.

1. The need for some evidence,
2. The manner of the evidence,
3. The comfort in this evidence.

1. The need for some evidence

The translation we use of our text for this morning tells us that “Jesus appeared again to His disciples.” The word ‘appeared’ has a rather neutral flavour to us; we imagine Jesus sort of coming into the disciples’ field of vision so that they see Him. In point of fact the term that’s used here is stronger, and tells us that Jesus made a point of being seen. He caused Himself to appear, “showed

Himself". We also need to note that in the Greek this same word occurs twice in vs 1, the second when our translation has, "It happened this way." That John would use the word "showed Himself" or "caused Himself to appear" twice in one verse is the equivalent of putting the notion in bold letters; John wants His readers to understand that this "appearing" is what this passage is about. That's the more so when we discover that John uses the same word a third time at the end of this account. Vs 14: "this is now the third time Jesus appeared to His disciples...." The very fact that John sees fit to use this word three times in this one account, sees fit in fact to sandwich the events at the Sea between this reference to 'showing the self', tells us that we must pay particular attention to this word.

The word itself, congregation, occurs more often in Scriptures, is also used elsewhere by John in His gospel. In fact, in John's use of the word, the term refers specifically to the act of making visible something that is invisible, showing something that you don't otherwise see.¹ So John, for example, used the word in ch 17 when he recorded Jesus' prayer to the Father that: "I have revealed Your name to...men..." (vs 6). 'Revealed', says our translation here, but it's the same word as in John 21.

What is striking in our text, though, is that this time John uses the word in combination with the word "Himself"; Jesus "showed Himself", 'caused Himself to appear'. That combination is striking, simply because people need not normally *show* themselves; people are by nature visible for others to see.

That Jesus showed Himself implies that Jesus was somehow not apparent, not obvious to others, not visible. Now, we recall that it happened before that Jesus after His resurrection was not recognised by others. Think, for example, of Mary Magdalene in the Garden; she did not recognise Jesus, thought He was the gardener. So too the travellers to Emmaus; they did not recognise Jesus though He walked with them for many miles. That Jesus was in fact different is indicated too by the fact that Jesus twice entered a room though the door was securely shut. All of it adds up to the conclusion that one could not really know whether Jesus was present or not; He might be present though you do not recognise Him as present. Meanwhile, to human minds, when we do not see evidence of someone's presence, we conclude that the person concerned is not present, is absent.

Was Jesus present with His disciples that morning at the lake? Had you asked the disciples, they would have said No. After all, He wasn't with them in the boat. And the man on the shore, well, that was a stranger....

Was Jesus present with His disciples that morning? We know the answer: Yes, He was; He's the man on the shore. He was present, but had closed the eyes of the disciples so that they did not recognise Him. Though they had walked with Jesus for some three years, and so ought to have no problem picking out His figure at the distance of 100 yards, they didn't. That's what John says emphatically: "the disciples did not know that it was Jesus" (vs 4). For Jesus had *closed their eyes*.

Why, brothers and sisters, did the Lord close their eyes such that they would not recognise Him? Why did the resurrected Christ hide Himself from His disciples on this day at the lake?

That, congregation, is because Christ wishes to *prepare* His disciples for His imminent ascension. That ascension meant that Jesus would depart from earth, yes, the disciples would see Him go so that He was *gone*. And His departure would be permanent; He was going to the Father such that no one would see Him on earth again until the day of His return on the clouds of heaven. Such an absence would for the disciples not be easy, if only because He had been with them from the time they had been called to be disciples. And had Jesus not said that the world would persecute them? (John 15:18ff). No, Jesus being gone would not be an easy experience for the disciples, would not be easy for the Church either. So the Lord Jesus Christ, in His care for His own, *made a point of preparing His disciples for that coming absence*. It is because His Ascension was on the horizon that the Lord closed the eyes of His disciples, created an opportunity in which He might "show Himself" to His disciples.

¹ cf TDNT.

If that, then, was the *need* for some evidence of His presence, what exactly was the evidence He was present? That's our second point:

2. *The Manner of the Evidence*

How was it now that the Lord showed Himself to His own? He did so, congregation, by *speaking* to the seven fishermen. "Children," said He to them, "have you any food?" By so asking, this stranger on the beach forced the fishermen in the boat to admit that their efforts of the night had been futile. Faced as the disciples were with their failure, there came from the stranger another word: "Cast the net on the right side of the boat." And a promise was added: "and you will find some [fish]."

Face it, congregation: if you were to receive an instruction as this from a stranger – "cast your net on the other side of the boat" – what would you do?? Surely, any fisherman in our midst would turn his back to such advice; if you can't catch fish on this side of the boat, you surely can't catch on that side either! But behold what the disciples do; professional fishermen though they be, they actually listen to the instruction of the stranger on the beach!! So reads the text: "So they cast [the net]." That raises a question on our part: what made these fishermen –tradesmen at that!– what made these fishermen listen to such silly advice from a stranger: try the other side of your boat!?

Frequently it is suggested that the disciples of John 21 recalled that they had received a similar instruction one time some three years ago. Our attention is then directed to Luke 5: the disciples had spent the night fishing but caught nothing, the next day Jesus used Peter's boat as a pulpit to teach the people, and when Jesus was finished instructing He told Peter to put out to sea and cast the net. Peter had protested on grounds that they'd fished all night but caught nothing, but eventually he did what the Lord commanded, with as result that he harvested such a school of fish that the nets were breaking. When now the disciples in John 21 heard that instruction of the stranger about trying the waters on the other side of the boat (so say these commentators), it's assumed that they recalled that incident of Luke 5, and so willingly cast their nets into the sea per instructions. Yet that explanation will not do, beloved, if only because the disciples of Luke 5 knew that it was Jesus who gave the command to cast the nets while the disciples of John 21 did not know who the stranger on the shore was! It is not until verse 7 –that's *after* the great quantity of fish are caught– that one disciple says to another that the stranger on the beach is in fact the Lord.

So we're faced with a question again: why did the disciples obey this silly command from the stranger on the beach? There can, beloved, be but one answer: they obeyed the stranger's instructions because Jesus –true God that He was– *moved* them to obey. "So they cast [their nets]": in those words, beloved, we are to hear the action of Almighty God. *He* issues the command to the disciples to cast their nets on the other side of the boat, and straightaway God goes a step further; He immediately works in the hearts of these fishermen to do what makes no sense according to the rules of the trade. And behold the result: "now they were not able to haul [the net] in, because of the multitude of fish" (vs 6).

We realise that this huge haul of fish was a work from God's hand. When all is said and done, it was not the disciples who netted those fish; it was the Lord God who sovereignly deposited –so to speak– these fish in the nets of the disciples. So it is that both the obedience to the command to drop the net on the other side of the boat *and* the resulting catch of fish were at bottom deeds done by God. On neither point can the disciples take the credit.

Then again, beloved, the thought that both obedience to a command and the reward that comes on that obedience are works of God is in itself nothing new to the Christian. This is what Paul has said in Philippians 2: "God is at work in you, both to will and to work" (vs 13). So the Church has confessed in Art 24 of the *Belgic Confession*: "we are indebted to God...for the good works we do," including works of obedience. That's the teaching of Scripture: obedience to any command from God

is God's work in our hearts.

But: it's not just that our obedience is God's work in us; the Confession adds that "God rewards good works," rewards the works He makes us do – even though we cannot take the credit for these works in the first place. That's exactly what's happened in John 21: *God* worked obedience to the command of the stranger so that they cast their nets on the other side of the boat, and then *God* rewarded that obedience with a massive catch of fish.

Now there is one more thing for us to notice: it is when that reward is noticed that the disciples come to realise that Jesus is in fact present with them. So says the passage: once that massive school fills the net, *then* it is that one of the disciples says to another: "It is the Lord!" (vs 7). This is then the manner in which the Lord was pleased to reveal Himself: He made Himself known to His disciples *by richly rewarding their obedience to His command*. That **reward**: that was the concluding evidence that Yes, He was present with them, present even though they might not recognise Him, see Him.

All of that leaves us with a question. Why, congregation, why did Jesus Christ choose to reveal His presence in this manner? What in the world is to be gained by this procedure?

Consider the reward. Elsewhere in Scriptures the Lord made so very clear to His own that a reward was specifically His blessing on obedience to His covenant demands. Think only of His Word in Deuteronomy 28:

"If you obey the voice of the Lord your God, being careful to do *all* His commandments which I command you this day..., all these blessings shall come upon you.... Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field" (28:1ff).

And later:

"the Lord will command the blessing upon you in your barns..., and He will bless you in the land... And the Lord will make you abound in prosperity..." (vs 8,11).

And true, that refers only to barns and fields, but we understand well that the promise is equally valid to lakes and nets.

But how does one know what God wants His people to do in any given circumstance? It has pleased the Lord to give to His people His Holy Word, and in that Word are His instructions to His people, instructions valid always, in all times and in all circumstances. O true, there may come moments when a command found in Holy Writ appears to make no sense at all, is ludicrous in the circumstances. But God does not expect His children to doubt whether obedience in a certain situation makes sense or not; it is simple *obedience* He expects. Such was His instruction to Israel long ago: "you shall have no other gods before Me" under *no* circumstance. "You shall honour your father and mother" in *every* circumstance. "You shall not bear false witness" *at all*. And the promise was: if you obey Me, simply obey Me blindly, irrespective of how absurd obedience might appear to you in the circumstances, then I will bless you.

Such was the promise of old, and it is this particular truth that Jesus lays before His disciples at the Sea of Tiberias. They received the instruction to cast the net on the other side of the boat, it's an instruction that made no sense in the circumstances, but never mind, He Himself worked the obedience, and behold the reward.

What the lesson of this instruction might be? A reward is promised on obedience. Here is a reward: the net is full. The reward comes from who? *God* in Christ. Here is a reward on obedience: *so it follows that Christ must be present*. That was a message the disciples understood: when the disciple whom Jesus loved saw that reward of the full net, *then* he said to Peter: "it is the Lord!"

This is the manner in which Jesus revealed Himself to His disciples at the Sea of Tiberias. He was pleased to use the voice, the **word**; He spoke. He accompanied that Word with His work of

obedience; He caused the disciples to act according to the instructions given. That work of obedience generated by Jesus He in turn crowned with a wonderful **reward**. All of it together is evidence that Yes, He was still with His disciples.

And that He was in fact very much present with His disciples He demonstrated by sitting down with them to eat; what can be a more convincing proof that someone is real, is really present, then to sit down and eat together! That's what Jesus does: "Come and have breakfast." And none of the disciples had any questions any more about whether Jesus was really present or not; "none...dared ask Him, 'Who are you?'" for they knew it was the Lord (vs 12).

3. The Comfort in this Evidence

And now, brothers and sisters, a particular conclusion follows. That conclusion is this: whether or not Jesus was present with His disciples before His ascension *did not depend on whether the disciples actually saw Him*. And that conclusion is equally true for today too: whether or not the Lord is present with us today in the ups and downs of life *does not depend on whether we see Him*. For: there is far more to reality than meets the eye. Christ has ascended into heaven, is no longer bodily on earth. But that does not mean that Christ is now totally absent. He would have us know that He *is* present with His own always and in every circumstance; He is with "His divinity, majesty, grace, and Spirit...never absent from us" (LD 18.47).

And what might be the evidence of His abiding presence? The evidence, dear brothers and sisters, is the following set of facts:

1. His word is heard,
2. there is *obedience* to His instructions, *and*
3. He gives His gracious *reward* on that obedience!

The ascended Christ—triune God—has given to His church a Book of instruction, a Bible full of ordinances that He requires the sons of men to obey, to believe. If there is any obedience to God in your life, it is simply and only because *the Lord Himself works that obedience*; you do not have within yourself the capacity to obey God, to believe His word, to do His will. And make no mistake: He works obedience only there *where He* with His divinity, majesty, grace, and Spirit *is present*.

Is Jesus with you today? Beloved, look around you and *see what there is to see*. When the door-bell rings, you know there is somebody at the door. When a child does not want to eat, you know that child is sick. Similarly, when you hear God's word, and you see works of obedience to the Lord in your life, *you know that God the Saviour is with you*.

What works of obedience, you ask? Faith first of all, believing the word of the Saviour as it comes to us in the preaching. And sorrow for sin too, and hungering for righteousness, and a zeal for childlike obedience to God's commands, and a glorying in God through Christ. Evidences all, of the work of Jesus Christ, evidences all of the presence of Jesus Christ.

And lest we still aren't persuaded that the Saviour is with us still, He underlines the fact of His presence by *crowning* His gifts of faith with a *reward, blessings*. Look around you, then: there is growth in faith, growth in the one generation and in the next: blessings of God pointing up that Yes, He is present with you still.

Where is Jesus in the grind of life, the disappointments and harassments we face? This is His promise, beloved: "I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Then it's true: we do not see Jesus with the naked eye. But we're not troubled by that any more, for we believe that Jesus is with us nevertheless. After all, Jesus has given us so much evidence, evidence—admittedly—that's apparent only to eye of faith. But the eye of faith sees it: in our midst, in our lives, there is obedience to God's commands, and there are rewards on this obedience too.

My Saviour is not far away. No, I don't see Him face to face; that won't happen until the last day. But I know it: He's not absent from me. He speaks to me in His Word, and He makes me believe it, and He crowns that faith with blessings of thankfulness.

Alone? Never.... Not even during the holidays....